Business Traveller
MIDDLE EAST

MARCH 2025

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POWER AND POISE

Key insights from successful women in hospitality

HISTORICAL SAUDI

Travel back in time with destinations in fabled Arabia

THE NEW ATHENS

Inside Greece's US$8 billion smart city of tomorrow

PLUS

Tried & Tested • Albania
Yerevan • Immersive Art

HOSPITALITY REDEFINED

Work, leisure, and community come together at InterContinental Residences Business Bay

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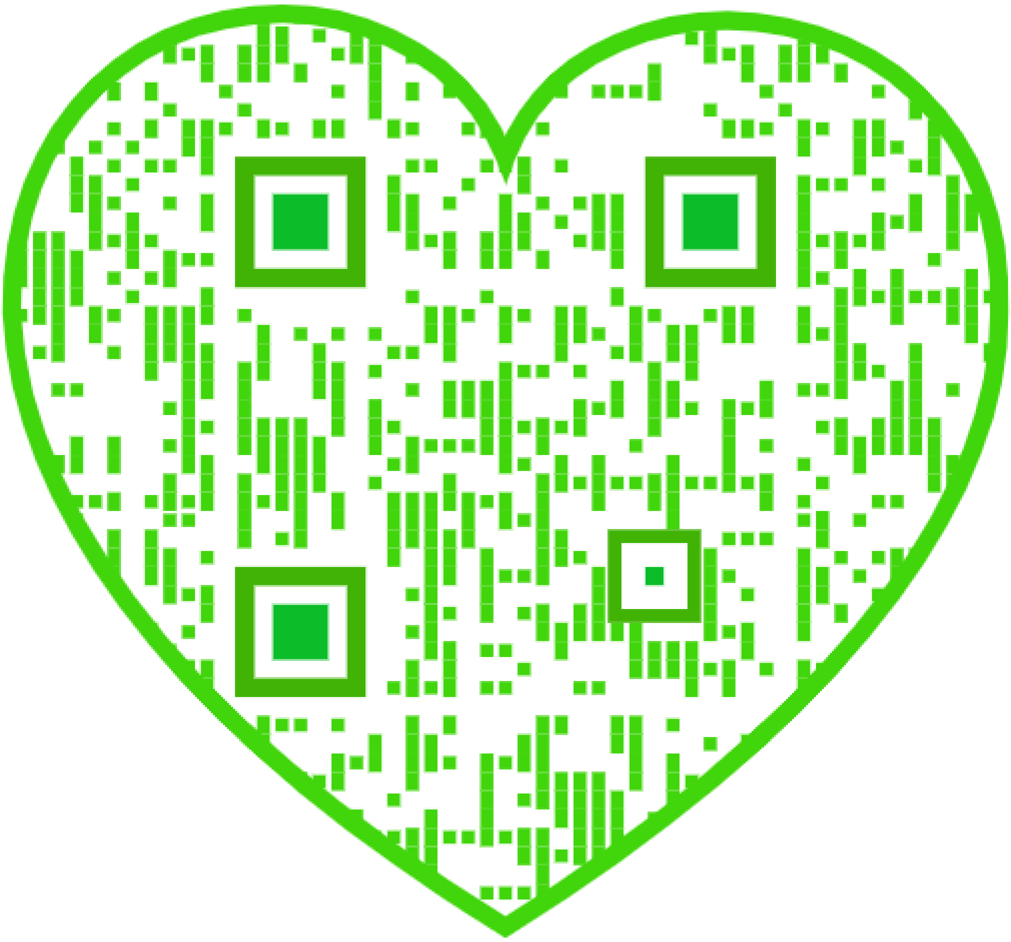

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Business Traveller MIDDLE EAST

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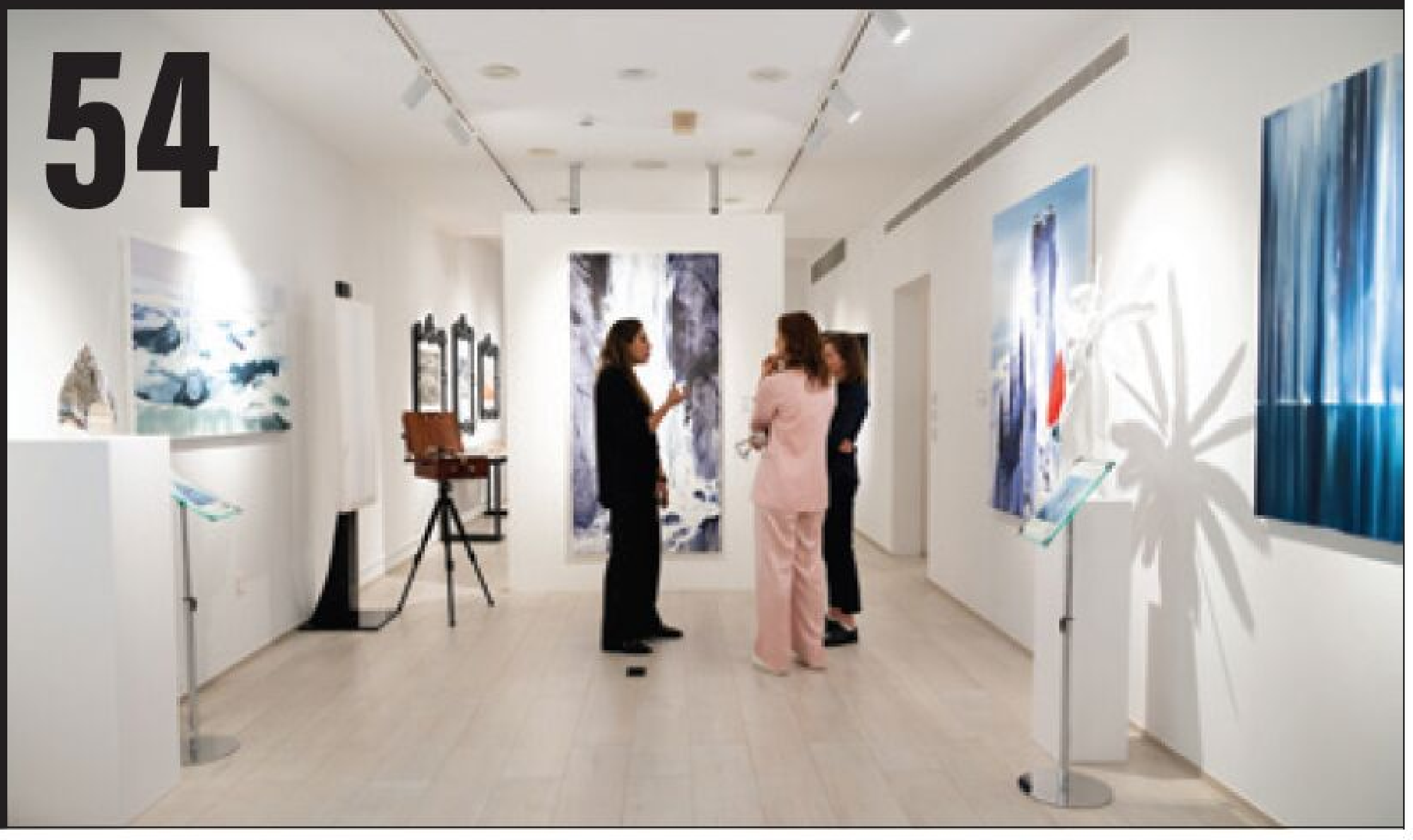
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When I was 20, I read a book called *Hotel Babylon*. Written by a British journalist called Imogen Edwards-Jones, the story takes place over a 24-hour period, sharing an hour-by-hour account of a day in the life of the manager of an exclusive boutique hotel. Although the characters are fictional, the incidents that take place throughout the book are all based on true stories, whether they were observed by the author herself, or told to her by industry insiders who spilled the good, the bad, and the ugly while remaining anonymous. The book was a hit: it did so well that it not only made various best-seller lists, it was also turned into a BBC One TV series, and spawned a series of other *Babylon* books, each one offering a similar fiction-inspired-by-truth exposé of the aviation, fashion, beach resort, pop, wedding, hospital, and restaurant industries. I flew through their pages eagerly, but none of them ever entertained me quite as intensely as that very first one did. Despite the fact that I was someone lucky enough to have been staying in hotels since I was a kid, I had never had the chance to peek behind the scenes like the book allowed me to. While the book focused on the most extreme or shocking stories for dramatic effect, it was a fascinating way to realise just how much is always going on in the life of a hotelier – and that at the best hotels, the average guest will never have any idea of how much time-sensitive, hard-working, attention-to-detail focused intensity will have gone into every aspect of their amazing, unforgettable stay.

In the 20 years since reading that book, my love and respect for the industry has only grown. Each property is a universe within itself, and the ones with a stellar team – the type that can turn even the smallest aspects into a thoughtful touch, so every moment becomes a memory – are the ones that stay with you long after you leave. This is the philosophy that InterContinental Residences Dubai Business Bay follows (p.14). The property may be relatively small, but within it is an entire world of incredible, passionate people that work hard to make every guest feel special, whether they're there for a shorter or a longer stay.

While leadership in hospitality still tends to be male-dominated, in recent years, women have come to make up 54 per cent of the global travel and tourism industry. Ahead of the annual occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March, we've spotlighted some of the amazing women leading the way in the region's hospitality industry (p.18). Their insight would likely be invaluable in taking advantage of the growing number of solo as well as group-based female travellers (p.46) – a market segment that many countries in the Middle East are becoming increasingly celebrated for. As spring approaches, we take a look at two other destinations rewriting the past for a fresh start – Athens (p.40) and Albania (p.50), while not forgetting the draw of history-inspired travel (p.37). Enjoy the issue!

Yi-Hwa Hanna

Yi-Hwa Hanna
Editor

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ATHENS CRADLES A NEW CIVILIZATION

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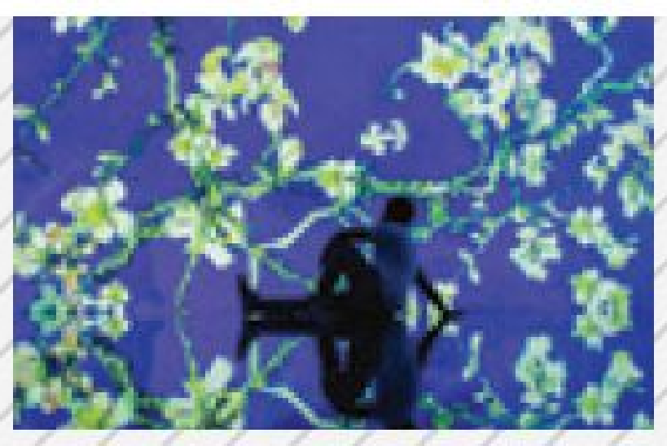

SMART TRAVELLER

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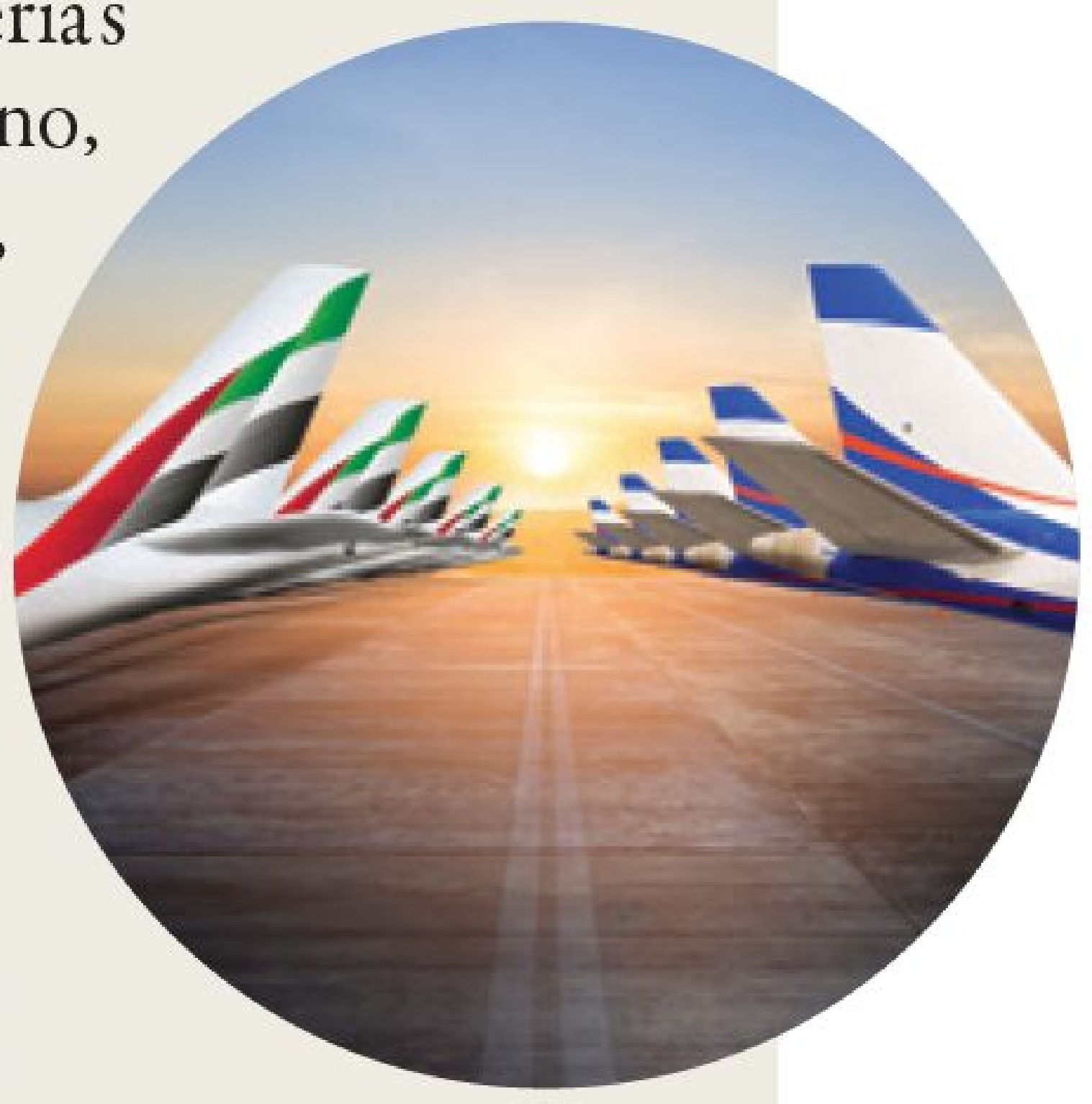
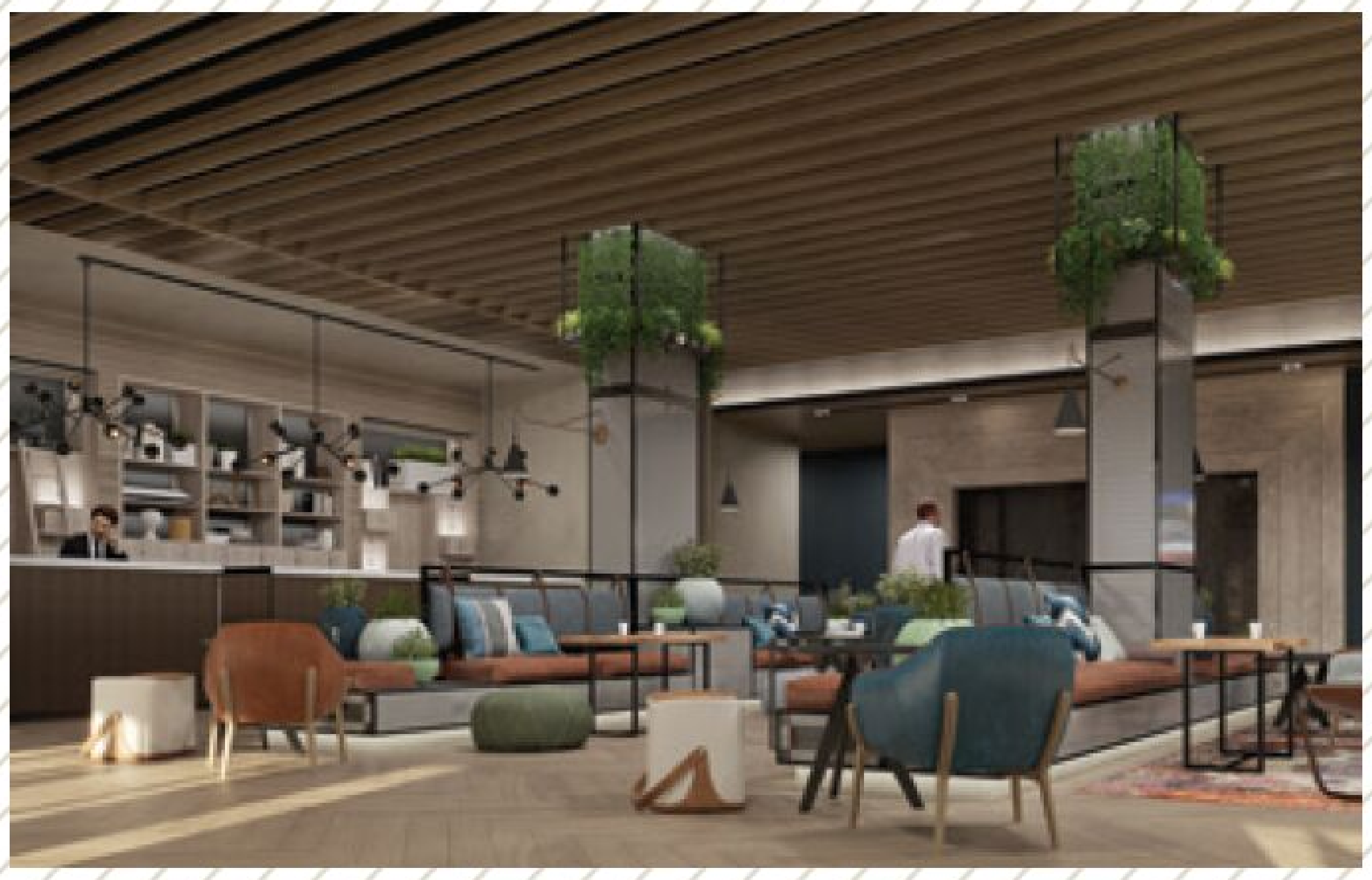
Kempinski Hotel & Resort Sariya opens in Yanbu, Saudi Arabia

THE NEW PROPERTY is the brand's second in the kingdom, and aims to introduce a new level of luxury and personalised service to Yanbu, also known as the "Pearl of the Red Sea." Located on Al Mahar Island within the Royal Commission, the resort boasts exceptional panoramic views of the Red Sea, alongside exclusive access to its pristine beaches. It has 118 rooms and suites, with many offering views of either a serene lagoon or the expansive waters of the sea. Its facilities cater to both business and leisure travellers, with a 1,302 sqm ballroom supported by four versatile breakout rooms. For leisure, guests can enjoy an infinity pool overlooking the Red Sea, a state-of-the-art fitness centre, a marina for other recreational activities, a spa, and two dining venues.

Emirates interlines with Nigeria's Air Peace

THE PARTNERSHIP with West Africa's largest airline will expand Emirates' network to 13 new cities in Nigeria inclusive of single-ticket travel and streamlined baggage. Passengers travelling from Dubai to Lagos can access onward connections to Asaba, Akure, Benin City, Calabar, Enugu, Ilorin, Kaduna, and Owerri. As one of Africa's major economic hubs, corporate travellers will benefit from new connections to Nigeria's capital of Abuja, Kano, Uyo, Port Harcourt, and Warri. This is also one of only two airlines operating first class into Lagos. The flights will be operated on Boeing 777-300ER aircraft.





New Four Points by Sheraton opens in Riyadh

MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL has opened a new Four Points by Sheraton in Riyadh, on King Abdulaziz Road. The new hotel is located close to a Riyadh Metro station and King Salman Park, with access to key business and government districts.The property features 132 rooms and suites across four floors, encompassing a range of Traditional, Deluxe, Executive, Junior Suites, and Executive Suites. Facilities include three meeting rooms, a fitness centre for men and women, and a swimming pool. Within its dining options, Parkside Restaurant offers an international menu, including a breakfast buffet.

RIYADH AIR RELEASES SONIC BRANDING COMPOSED AT ABBEY ROAD STUDIOS

RIYADH AIR has released what it refers to as a "sonic brand", named Sound of a New Era, that was composed at Abbey Road Studios. This comes ahead of the carrier's highly anticipated launch this year. The airline plans to integrate the sonic brand into touchpoints throughout the passenger journey, including cabin announcements, inflight entertainment, and during boarding and meal services. It describes the tune as "creating a sensory journey that inspires awe and connection" and "rooted in cultural identity". The recording features 13 musicians from the Saudi National Orchestra who played traditional instruments such as the oud, qanun, and ney. One of the musicians was the Saudi National Orchestra's first female violinist.

IMAGES: SUPPLIED

DESERT ROCK RESORT OPENS IN SAUDI'S RED SEA DESTINATION

DESIGNED BY Oppenheim Architecture, with interiors by Studio Paolo Ferrari, the resort is cleverly integrated into the landscape, with some of its 54 villas and suites appearing to hang from rock pinnacles, and others built into the face of the mountain. Each comes with a private pool and undisrupted views of the horizon. In a hidden part of the resort, the Three-Bedroom Royal Villa offers complete privacy and seclusion. An all-season destination with an average annual temperature of 32°C, it's a 20-minute drive from Red Sea International Airport (RSI) and a 30-minute drive from the Red Sea coast. The resort takes advantage of this natural setting with a large range of activities and outdoor adventures. There's also a spa, with a range of treatments inspired by the desert, therapies based on ancient wellness wisdom, and products from renowned wellness brands AMRA and Dr. Burgener. The resort is hidden in a protected 30,000 sqm sanctuary of untouched nature. There are six restaurants and bars including Nyra, overseen by acclaimed Turkish chef Osman Sezener, known for his Michelin-starred restaurants in Bodrum and Izmir, and The Observatory - a hidden sanctuary high above the resort, accessed by a 120m suspension bridge.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Idioms from around the world that have us scratching our heads. This issue, it's an Australian expression.

Phrase: *To go off like a frog in a sock*
Literally: *To jump around in a way that resembles going crazy or berserk*
Meaning: *To display intense emotion, like being very excited or angry*

ETIHAD AIRWAYS
AIRLINE WITH THE BEST CABIN CREW
EMIRATES
TURKISH AIRLINES

Voting opens for the Business Traveller Middle East Awards 2025

THE VOTING PERIOD has opened for the Business Traveller Middle East Awards – one of the most highly-anticipated events on the annual calendar for the region's travel industry. Celebrating the very best in the business, the awards ceremony – to be held at the InterContinental Dubai Festival City on 28 April – will honour the winners, while bringing together C-suite executives, key decision makers, and thought leaders to reflect upon and recognise the industry's performance over the last 12 months, while gathering insights into what lies ahead. Nominations opened in January for categories spanning airlines, airports and hotels, and now, YOU – our readers – can still vote across all 39 categories, until the voting phase closes this month! From business hotels to leisure properties in major cities across the region, to airports, airlines, lounges, and more, there is no restriction on how many categories each individual can vote for.

The process to determine the winners is meticulous, impartial, and democratic. This final round of voting will determine the shortlist. To place your vote, head to **btme.ae**

EMEA region's first-ever Signia by Hilton opens in Amman, Jordan

THE NEW PROPERTY marks the brand's international debut and first property outside the U.S. Located in the Shmeisani business district, it's set to become a sought-after location for business and leisure travellers in the heart of Jordan's capital. The hotel features 272 guestrooms that incorporate a colour palette inspired by Jordan's natural landscape, with modern amenities designed for both relaxation and functionality. Guests staying in Club Signia rooms and suites receive additional in-room amenities such as a Dyson hair dryer, fresh dates, and priority reservations at the hotel's restaurants. The Club Signia Lounge offers all-day dining, dedicated concierge services, and a selection of beverages and snacks. The open-concept lobby is designed as a social space, while the property also has four dining options. It has 11,270 sqm of event space (with 17 meeting rooms), as well as a fitness centre, an outdoor pool, and a spa with nine treatment rooms, a spa bath, a sauna, and a steam room.

World's largest Courtyard by Marriott to open in Saudi Arabia

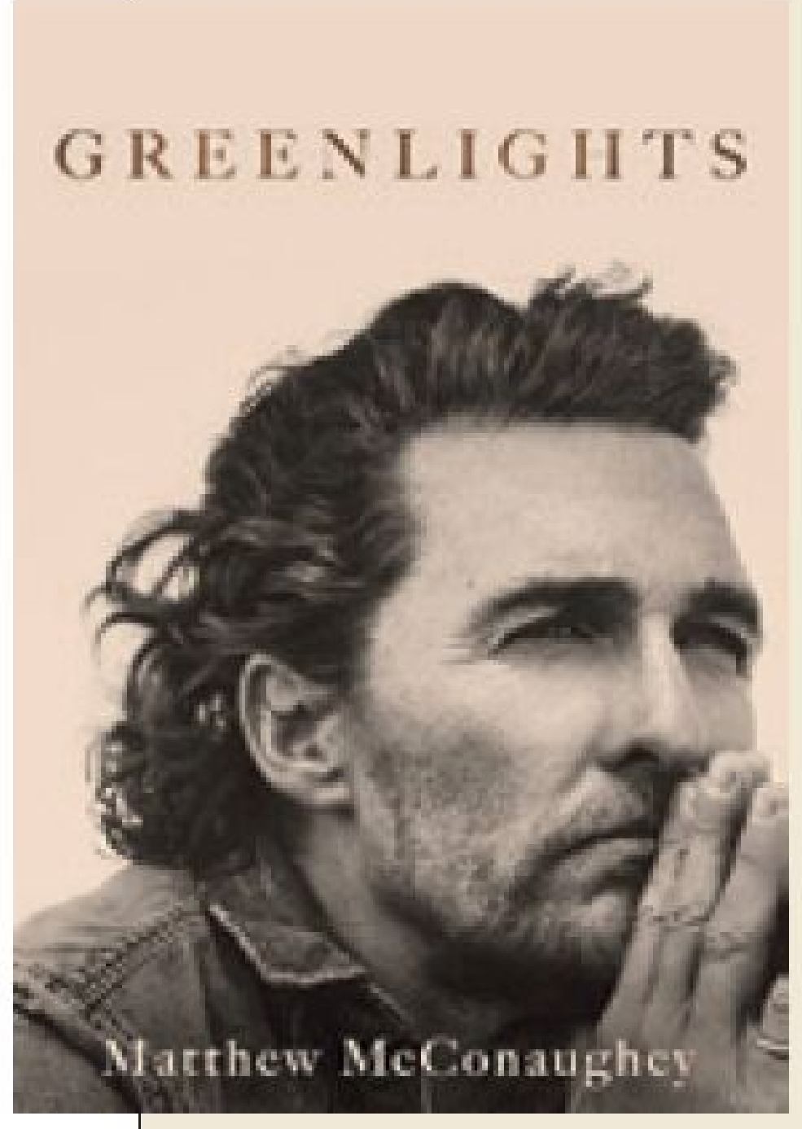
MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL has signed an agreement with Al Qimmah Hospitality Company and Amwaj Real Estate Company, subsidiaries of BinDawood Trading, to open a 2,179-room Courtyard by Marriott in Makkah's Al Naseem District. Set to open in 2026, Courtyard by Marriott Makkah Al Naseem will be the largest hotel under the brand worldwide.

The hotel will feature seven interconnected towers, a restaurant seating over 1,800 guests, a lobby lounge, and The Market – Courtyard's signature grab-and-go concept. Design plans incorporate the brand's signature style, offering modern amenities tailored to religious and leisure travellers alike.

COURTYARD
COURTYARD

INFLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

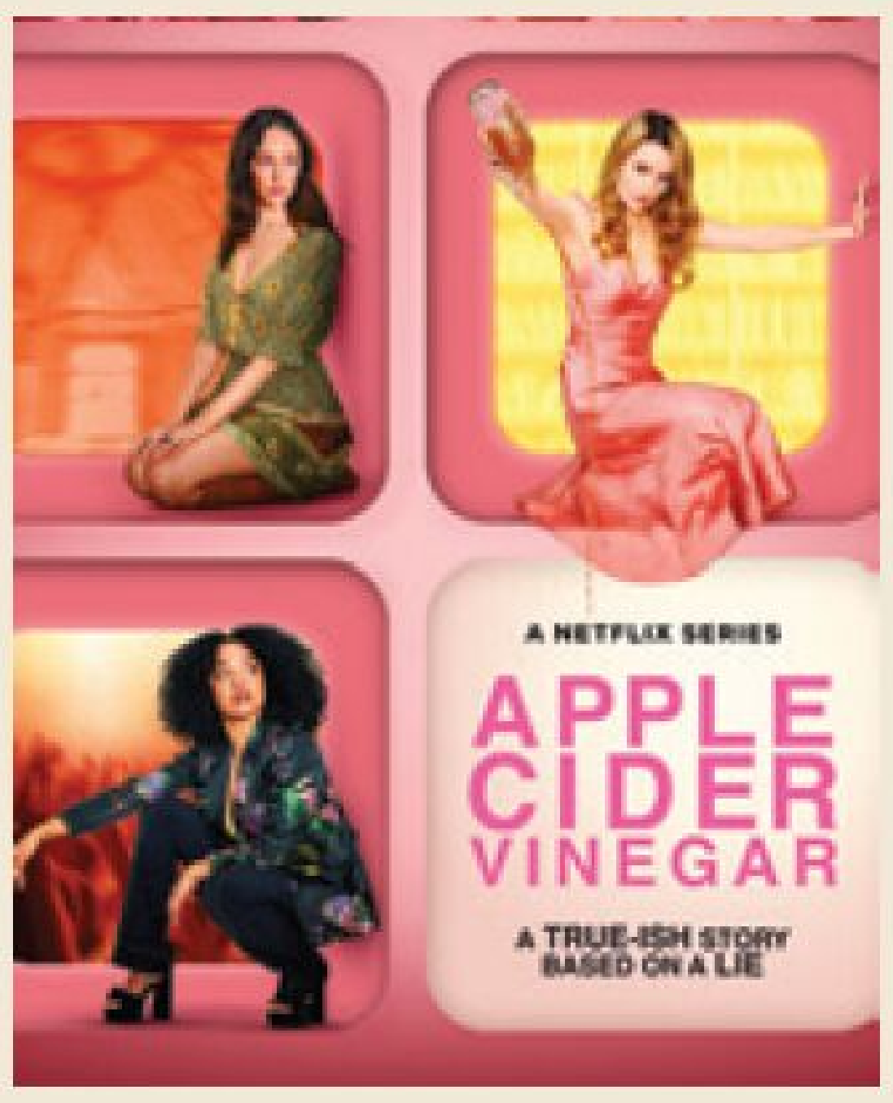
Our picks to make time fly by



READ: ***Greenlights, Matthew McConaughey***
This book by the Academy Award-winning actor isn't a conventional memoir – it's described as a collection of "raucous stories and outlaw wisdom". In it, the Texas native shares snippets from various diaries he kept over a 35-year period, including the life lessons that he's learned through life's challenges both good and bad. Told through the lens of approaching each lesson as a "green light" – a chance to move forward through life – it's been celebrated as an intimate, honest, and inspiring read with an insight into how this positive attitude can help us live a more fulfilled life.
Kinokuniya, Dhs66

DXB UNHEARD
PRESENTED BY KATE GARRAWAY

LISTEN: ***DXB Unheard***
In this recently-launched podcast series, former British TV host Kate Garraway hosts a series of explorations into the hidden gems and inspiring stories of Dubai. Its eight episodes feature interviews with people who have helped make the city what it is. **Available on YouTube.**



WATCH: ***Apple Cider Vinegar***
This dramatization inspired by the book *The Woman Who Fooled the World* is loosely based on the true story of Belle Gibson, a former influencer exposed as a con artist. It's a chilling look into influencer culture, the modern wellness industry, and blind belief. **Available on Netflix.**

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QATAR AIRWAYS
PARIS
QATAR AIRWAYS
2028

Qatar Airways extends partnership with Paris Saint-Germain until 2028

THE ANNOUNCEMENT follows PSG's recent victory over Manchester City in the UEFA Champions League, where Qatar Airways is also an Official Airline Partner. Qatar Duty Free and Hamad International Airport will now play key roles in a broader ecosystem, enhancing the fan experience and strengthening brand engagement. The airline's logo will remain prominently featured on PSG's matchday and training kits for domestic and international competitions, including Ligue 1 and UEFA tournaments. The partnership will continue to enhance Qatar Airways' engagement with PSG's global fan base of over 220 million, offering exclusive experiences through the Privilege Club loyalty programme.

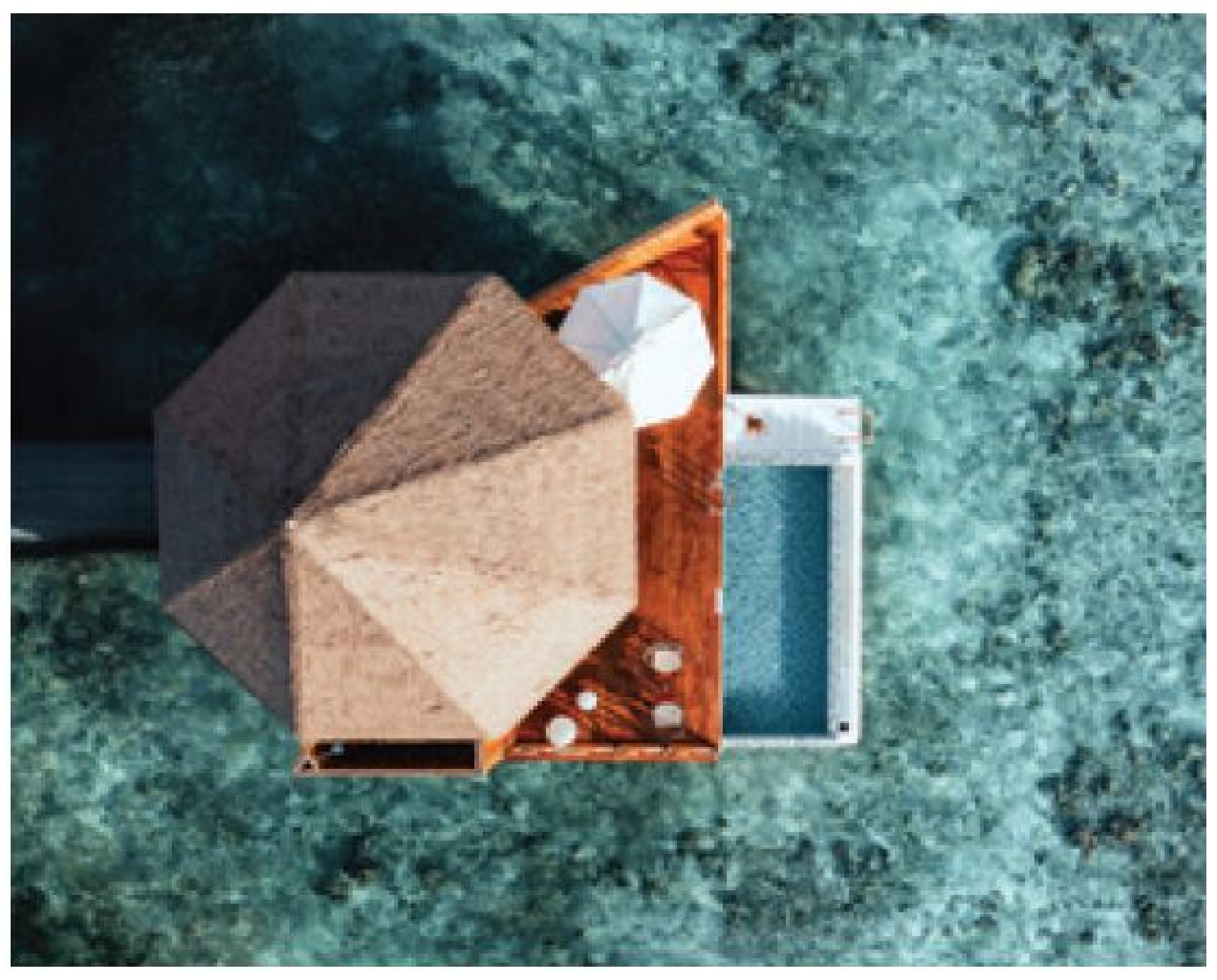
Hyatt Regency Oryx Doha unveils extensive renovation

The five-star hotel has transformed its guest rooms, lobby lounge, and business facilities into a more refined and contemporary hospitality experience. Its 388 rooms and 12 suites have been redesigned with a more modern aesthetic with soothing tones, with twin and king room configurations offering views of the hotel pool or atrium, or the city. A standout is the Oryx Suite, with a separate living and dining area, and a spacious bathroom equipped with a walk-in rain shower and bathtub. Another innovative addition is the Fitness Suite, featuring an in-room foldable treadmill – intended to cater to guests who highly value maintaining their fitness routines while travelling. The hotel has also revamped its lobby lounge, which features a striking atrium, a contemporary art installation, and an ergonomically-designed communal workstation intended to provide an inviting and functional space for business travellers.

Etihad to launch flights to Sochi in May 2025

ETIHAD AIRWAYS will be launching nonstop flights to Sochi, Russia – the gateway to the north-east coast of the Black Sea – this May. The new route will provide guests with nonstop access to the Krasnodar Krai region, popular for its beaches and mountains in the summer, and its skiing and snowboarding opportunities in the nearby Caucasus Mountains in the winter, made famous by the 2014 Winter Olympics. The flights are anticipated to debut on 29 May 2025, and regulatory approvals pending, continue to take place three times a week thereafter between Zayed International Airport, Abu Dhabi (AUH) and Sochi International Airport (AER), timed to optimise a leisure break in summer or winter. They are already on sale, and scheduled to operate on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays using one of the airline's modern A320 family aircraft, with eight seats in Business and 150 in Economy.

Accor and Emirates Skywards expand partnership



ACCOR HAS EXPANDED its partnership with Emirates Skywards, the loyalty programme of Emirates and flydubai – through implementing a new two-way points conversion system with its own award-winning loyalty membership and booking platform, ALL. Emirates Skywards members who are also ALL members can now convert their Skywards Miles into ALL Reward points, gaining access to Accor's extensive portfolio of over 5,600 hotels across more than 45 brands, as well as 5,000 Limitless Experiences. For every 4,000 Skywards Miles, members will receive 1,000 Reward points, which can be redeemed for hotel stays, dining experiences, or exclusive Limitless Experiences via ALL.com. The partnership also enables ALL members to convert their Reward points into Skywards Miles, with the conversion rate set at 4,000 Reward points to 2,000 Skywards Miles. These can be redeemed for a range of travel rewards, including flights on Emirates and partner airlines, flight upgrades, hotel stays, exclusive hospitality experiences at major sporting and cultural events, tours, and a range of unique, money-can't-buy experiences.

LIWA VILLAGE PLANTS SEEDS FOR NEW GREEN INITIATIVES

LIWA VILLAGE, part of the Liwa International Festival in the heart of the Al Dhafra desert, made significant steps toward sustainability this year. The event ran over 23 days in the Al Dhafra region of Abu Dhabi from December to January and in its recent festival, the village set a new benchmark in eco-conscious event planning by integrating renewable energy solutions and innovative technologies.

It integrated its renewable energy, with 20 per cent of its operations powered by solar power. The village also introduced the GCC's first mobile battery system, marking a step towards energy efficiency in large-scale events. These initiatives support the UAE's vision in reducing carbon emissions and using renewable energy. Beyond its green efforts, Liwa Village offered visitors six themed areas providing everything from cultural experiences and thrilling adventures to live music and culinary therapy.

DID YOU KNOW?

The **Royal Commission for AlUla** is working with a global network of partners such as France's RATP Dev to regenerate AlUla as a leading heritage destination. While some parts of its 360 Mobility plan are already running, such as Autonomous and Electrical Vehicles, others are in the design and fabrication stage, such as the Journey Through Time Experiential Tram. The aim is to create a living blueprint for sustainable, cohesive mobility systems.

Emirates Park Zoo & Resort eliminates 51,000kg of carbon emissions

OVER 342,919 PLASTIC BOTTLES and aluminium cans have been collected as part of its sustainability efforts, reducing carbon emissions by over 51,000kg to date. This impressive achievement has been made possible through a partnership with Sparklo, a global cleantech company. Over 1,400 zoo visitors participated in the recycling efforts. Sparklo's mission goes beyond providing a recycling solution; it aims to transform recycling into an engaging and rewarding process, fostering new eco-friendly habits among the population. The company's innovative reverse vending machines, known as Sparklomats, are central to this mission. These state-of-the-art machines collect plastic bottles and aluminium cans while offering exciting rewards to users, making recycling a fun and fulfilling experience. Since the initiative began, the response has been overwhelmingly positive, with 304,408 plastic bottles, weighing approximately 7,610kg, and 38,513 aluminium cans, weighing a total of around 579kg, being recycled.

RECYCLE BOTTLES & CANS FOR REWARDS
LET'S GO!

Siyam World partners with CLEANMaldives to tackle plastic waste

SIYAM WORLD MALDIVES has begun working with CLEANMaldives under the PLEASE Project (Plastic Free Rivers and Seas for South Asia), as part of its ongoing commitment to sustainability. This year-long pilot project, supported by organisations such as UNOPS, the World Bank, SACEP, CLEANMaldives, and the Climate Collective Foundation, aims to address plastic waste while setting a new standard for innovative recycling solutions in the Maldives. The focus also lies on reducing single-use plastics by recycling plastic waste on-site into durable, eco-friendly furniture, including benches and loungers. With the use of advanced recycling technology provided by CLEANMaldives solution provider Econscious, Siyam World is pioneering a circular economy model that showcases the potential for scalable sustainability solutions. The resort provides the infrastructure, oversees operations, and ensures efficient waste collection, while CLEANMaldives supplies cutting-edge machinery and delivers technical training to resort staff.

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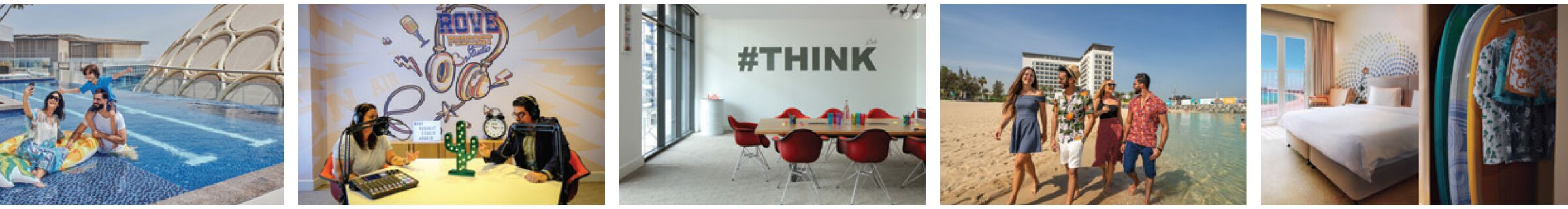

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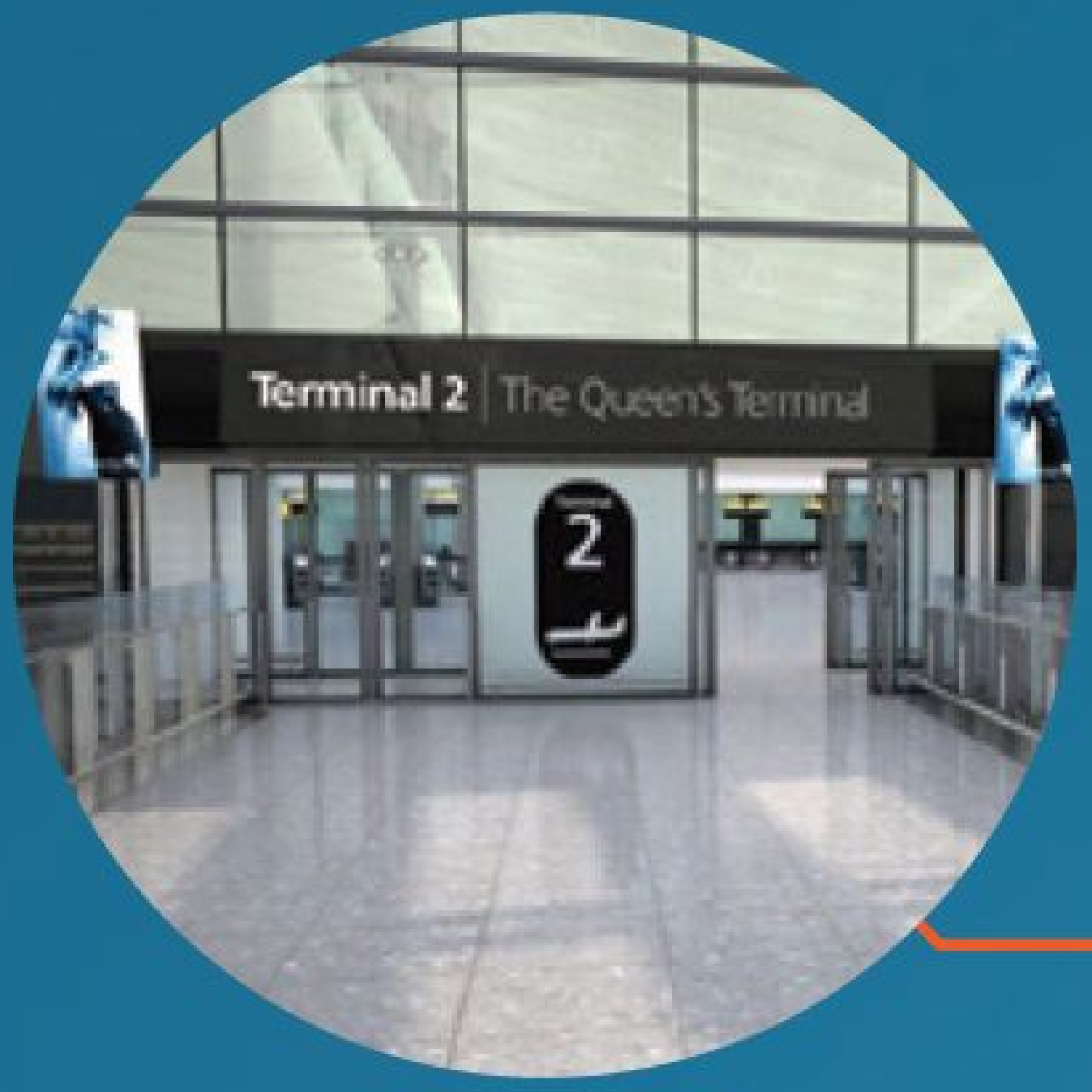
Heathrow to increase capacity at its T2 and T5

Heathrow's CEO described the plans – which follow new backing for a third runway, and previously-announced plans for a new baggage system at T2, replacing the 30-year-old-system there – as "the largest private investment programme in Heathrow's history".



Lufthansa Group Airlines introduces Apple AirTag tracking

The group – which includes Lufthansa, SWISS, Austrian Airlines, Brussels Airlines, and Eurowings - has introduced Apple AirTag integration for enhanced baggage tracking. Passengers can now securely and seamlessly share AirTag data with the airlines' baggage tracing service.

Qatar Airways to launch flights to Bogota and Caracas in 2025

Set for "early summer 2025", the new routes' schedules are yet to be confirmed, but the carrier said it would offer a twice-weekly service departing Doha on Wednesdays and Sundays, routing nonstop to Bogotá and then continuing to Caracas.

Hilton to add four hotels in Lyon

The new properties will be under its Spark and Doubletree brands, with the conversion of existing properties under a franchise agreement with Arteloge. These additions will mark the debut of Hilton's "premium economy" Spark brand in France. The new properties will each have around 100 rooms or just over.

Etihad increases flights to Milan

The UAE airline will be adding a third daily flight between Abu Dhabi and Milan from 1 November, 2025. The combined triple-daily service will offer 12,600 seats per week between Abu Dhabi and Milan on Boeing 777-300 and Airbus A321LR aircraft, representing a year-on-year capacity increase of almost 115%.

SAS to offer Starlink-powered wifi across entire fleet

The recently-added SkyTeam member is partnering with SpaceX to install the group's Starlink technology, with the rollout expected to start at the end of 2025. Wifi connectivity will be free for all EuroBonus members, who will able to access the service throughout a flight.

TURKISH AIRLINES
LOUNGE
STAR ALLIANCE GOLD

Turkish Airlines opens lounge at Tokyo Narita

The carrier's seventh international lounge, it's the airline's largest outside of Istanbul, able to fit up to 105 guests. It's in the airport's Terminal 1 South Wing. Features include shower rooms, relaxation areas, dedicated workspaces, daybeds with apron views, a VIP room, and a baby care room.

Cathay Pacific partners with Mott32

"One of the world's most awarded Chinese restaurant brands" will now bring customers an elevated dining experience at The Pier, the airline's first class lounge at Hong Kong International Airport. The new menus have been released on rotation since 21 January alongside The Pier's monthly first class à la carte menu.

Kazakhstan introduces QR Code-Based Tourist Safety System

The new system aims to improve the security and experience of international visitors. Upon arrival, travellers will receive a special card with a QR code that connects them to the multilingual online platform SafeTravel.kz, with essential safety resources, emergency contacts, and more.

Etihad takes A380 to Singapore

Rostering one of its superjumbos onto flights between Abu Dhabi and Singapore for the first time, the A380 replaces the carrier's Boeing 787-10 on the route. increasing capacity by 28% and adding more than 700 weekly seats. It also means Etihad is now offering The Residence suite on flights to Singapore.

IMAGES: SUPPLIED; ADOBE STOCK

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

Business, Leisure, Belonging

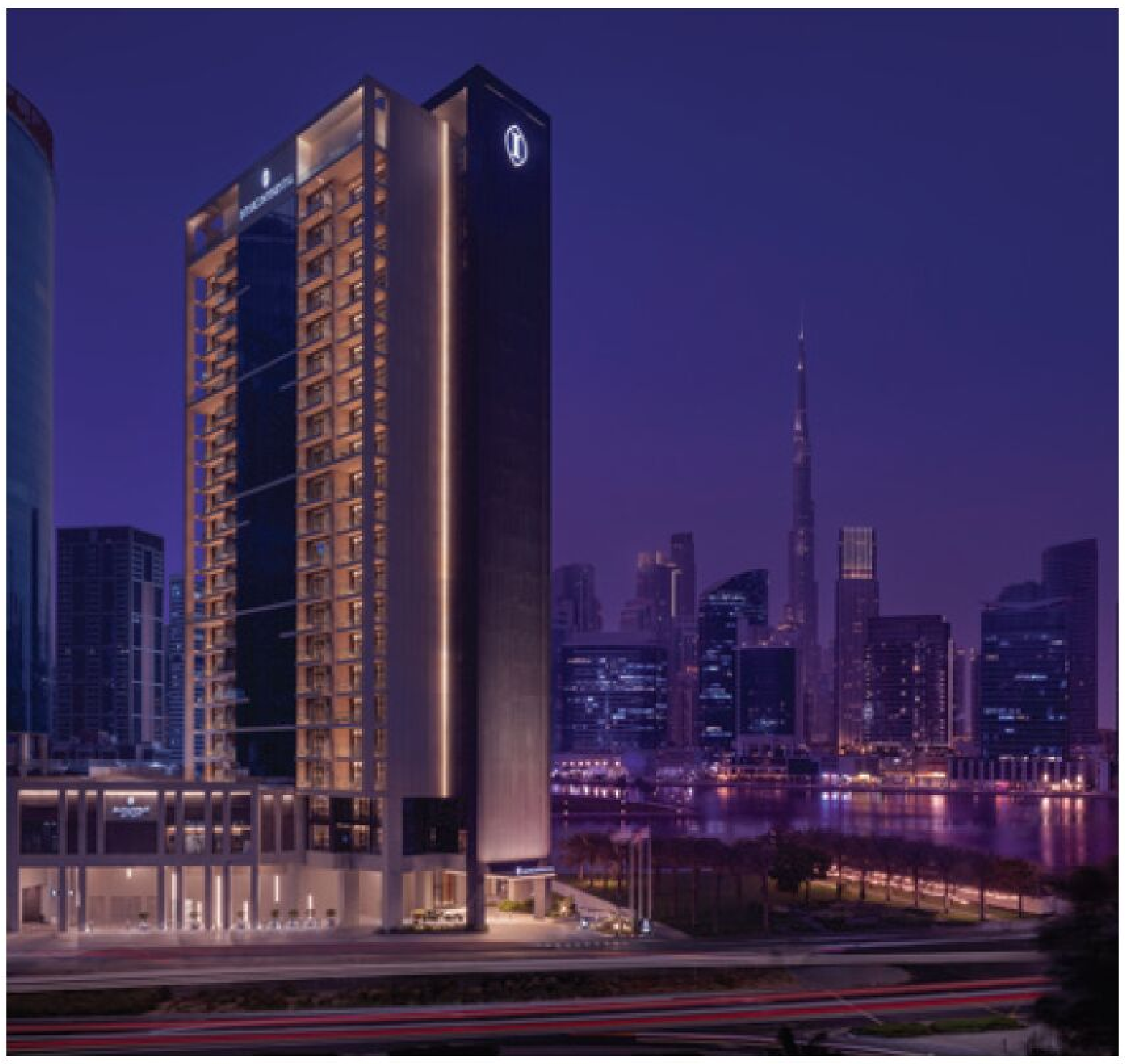
Whether you're there for a short or a long stay, or for business or leisure, InterContinental Residences Dubai Business Bay is more than a luxury property – it's an ode to the true meaning of hospitality

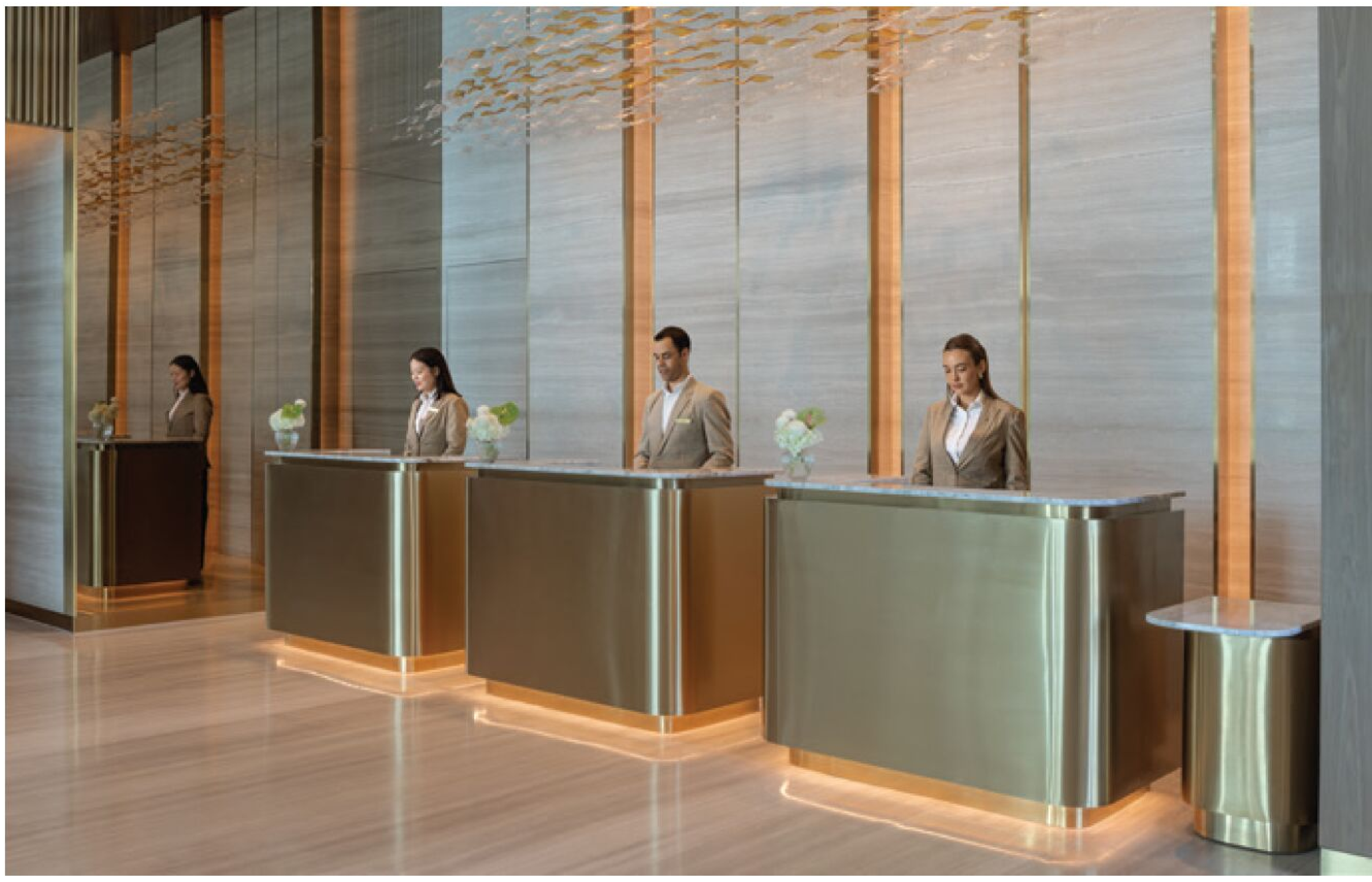
The first time I stepped foot into the InterContinental Residences Dubai Business Bay, I was meeting a colleague, travelling there in different cars. With a smile, he remarked that this was the first time in years that he had been greeted so warmly upon arrival at a luxury property: "The man who took my valet ticket didn't just say hello – he asked me how my day was, and he actually wanted to listen to the answer," he said. It may have been a simple gesture, but this small act had a profound effect on his day, and is one that he now remembers fondly each time he thinks of this establishment.

It was an act indicative of the heartfelt way this unique property is run on a daily basis. Opened in September 2024 in the heart of Dubai's bustling Business Bay district, it's the third InterContinental Residences in the UAE.

This property, in particular, is made up of 176 serviced residences, ranging from studios to three-bedroom units. Whether you're there for a short or a long stay, the accommodations are meant to offer you the feeling of luxury residential living. The bespoke living spaces are full of light, and offer breathtaking views of the skyline – including the iconic Burj Khalifa. The finishings are lavish without being ostentatious, with a calming and earthy neutral colour palette, and high-end, functional applicances – including modern, integrated water purifiers that support the property's commitment to sustainability.

The property also features a fully equipped 24-hour fitness centre, a rooftop swimming pool with panoramic city views, and the Planet Trekkers Kids Club. It's pet-friendly, and ideally situated for both business and leisure travellers. It can be a hotel and a luxurious home all at once.





ABOVE: A living room in a suite at InterContinental Residences Dubai Business Bay

TOP RIGHT: The property's lobby

OPPOSITE PAGE: The property is located in the heart of Business Bay

> By creating a sense of community, we forge deeper connections with our guests

But beyond its fine finishings, what really makes this property stand out is its sense of community and genuine care. Each weekend, you'll find new ways to elevate your experience and connect with others (or yourself), whether that's an ice bath and Wim Hof-led breathwork session on the rooftop, yoga amidst the greenery, or the chance to take a workshop on art therapy or mindfulness.

"The idea for a community-centric approach stemmed from a deep understanding of the evolving needs and desires of modern travellers. Today's guests seek more than just a place to stay; they crave authentic experiences and a sense of belonging," says Mohamed Mahmoud, cluster general manager at InterContinental Residences and Crowne Plaza Dubai Business Bay. "We recognised the opportunity to create a vibrant hub where guests can connect with each other, engage with the local community, and immerse themselves in the rich culture of Dubai. Our focus here is on creating a truly personalised and attentive experience," he says.

Mahmoud says that this approach has been crucial for differentiating themselves in Dubai's competitive market. "It goes beyond traditional hospitality offerings," he explains, continuing: "By creating a sense of community, we forge deeper connections with our guests, fostering loyalty and positive word-of-mouth referrals. This approach not only enhances the guest experience but also strengthens our brand reputation and drives long-term success." All of this is made possible by Mahmoud's leadership style. His team are quick to sing his praises sincerely and without any prompting, and his commitment to helping each individual reach their full potential is felt across the property.

Mahmoud explains: "I believe in fostering a collaborative, family-like environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and genuinely motivated to contribute their unique talents and ideas. Good quality is not achieved by accident. It is a conscious pursuit of excellence. I strive to provide clear direction and expectations, offering consistent support and guidance along the way. Celebrating every win is crucial – recognising and appreciating everyone's hard work is of paramount importance. Ultimately, my goal is to inspire the team to create truly exceptional and memorable experiences for our guests. When we work together, supporting each other and feeling valued, that positive energy naturally translates to our guests, making their stay special. As our team grows and develops, so does the level of hospitality we can offer. It's a win-win for all stakeholders."

Karolina Carrasco, the property's cluster learning and quality manager, says: "I've never met a leadership team that is more hands-on than this. It's not rare to see our IT director hosting someone at breakfast, or our director of finance assisting with the rooms when an extra hand is needed. I think it really gives our colleagues a boost to see even our leadership team being so involved. It helps us all be a bit more open, and really realise we're all always aiming for the same goal." →

IMAGES: INTERCONTINENTAL HOTELS & RESORTS

Mahmoud encourages the team to really get to know their guests, whether they're there for leisure or business, or for a short stay or a long period. Understanding their individual needs and preferences allows them to create personalised experiences, he says, adding that these thoughtful touchpoints make a lasting impact.

"Tailored customer service is the most important ingredient in our recipe of success. Every action is an opportunity to improve. It's about anticipating our guests' needs, exceeding their expectations, and creating personalised experiences that leave a lasting impression. We achieve this by empowering our team to take ownership, providing them with the necessary training and resources, and fostering a culture of genuine care and attentiveness. We encourage our team to go the extra mile, paying attention to the smallest details that can make a big difference in the guest experience," Mahmoud says.

"When I come to work, I'm not just here to sell the property, or even to sell experiences. It's so much more than that," agrees Madisse Matar, the property's cluster director of sales and marketing. "With our residences, for instance, we have some guests staying with us for a year. During that time, as you can imagine, they'll go through the ups and downs of life – with all of its tough times and its fun and changes; perhaps starting a new job or making new friends. Those who are relocating to Dubai might need help finding a school for their child. Those with a new family might need advice on nurseries. It's an honour to be able to make memories with them, and to be able to help provide them with whatever they need to make their lives happier." She sees the team's role as akin to that of an extended member of a guest's family. It's also a reflection of the highly-valued emphasis placed on hospitality within the Arab world. "It's not a mindset, it's a culture," she says. She recalls how at the hotel's pre-opening, Mahmoud reminded all of the senior members of his team that it is part of their role to empower and encourage their own direct reports, the same way he wants to empower them. "We want everyone – our colleagues and ourselves – to come up with new initiatives and ideas; to feel free to be ourselves, and to be involved. This empowerment starts from the top, and trickles down to our wider team, as well as our guests," she says. At breakfast, she shares, they don't like to address their guests by room number but rather, by their name. "We know their names, their families, what they do, where they work," she says, adding that this is part of their culture: it's not just a meal or a moment to them, but an entire experience, and one that is part of a greater whole.

Before each guest arrives, they'll receive a message from Shiyi Lei, the property's rooms manager, or a member of her team. In it, they'll ask everything from what your expected arrival time is to what activities you enjoy, your preferred type of pillow, and even if you have a favourite snack or a go-to side of the bed. "It is super important for us to ensure that we know and understand our guests, and part of that is this study that begins even before they arrive. This is how we can tailor-make their experience, and create such a sensational experience for each guest. It can be a very small gesture from us, or fulfilling a specific request coming from them, but this is how we ensure each person feels special," Lei says. "I see each day as a golden opportunity to create a memorable experience for a guest; we can have a great impact in making their day different, and no day will ever be the same. For me, too, every day is a fresh start to learn and grow; to become the best version of myself and help others do the same," she adds. "We don't want to run as just another luxury hotel. Yes, we want to have the luxury touch, but we want every colleague to [be on the same page] with our awareness of how important it is to make our guests feel special. [After all, in time], a guest might forget

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Relaxing at the rooftop pool; Ancora, the hotel's Mediterranean restaurant; Mohamed Mahmoud, the property's general manager; In the kitchen of a suite; Planet Trekkers kids club; A bedroom at the InterContinental Residences Dubai Business Bay

the location, the furniture, or other details like that, but they will never forget how you made them feel," Lei says. She personally checks in with the property's long-stay guests on an individual basis at least once every month, and for short-term guests, just as much attention and care is given to their preferences and needs. If any issues do arise, it's not only important for the team to respond to it with an immediate remedy, but they ensure that every appropriate member of staff is made aware of what is needed; so that for the guest, the experience winds up feeling seamless. This human touch could mean that a guest who has been feeling unwell might receive a healing special meal from the chef sent to their door, and the duty manager managing the next shift would already be aware, to be able to ask them how they're feeling and if they needed anything further. Mahmoud explains that this personal approach has led to positive word-of-mouth referalls, enhancing the guest experience while also strengthening the brand's reputation and driving long-term success.

Each time a new occasion arises, from New Years Eve to Valentine's Day, Abishek Grover, the property's cluster assistant director of marketing, will have been hard at work behind the scenes to create an unforgettable celebration. His ability to thrive through the intense juggling acts that are required to create a jaw-dropping, multi-element hospitality experience is essential for making the magic happen. Anyone who has ever worked in hotels and hospitality will know that it can be a challenging and notoriously demanding industry, but it's a rewarding one. "It's sort of like asking yourself, 'How can you combine a bunch of invisible strings to turn it into a beautiful fabric that each guest can really enjoy?'" Grover jokes. He is, in a very practical sense, a storyteller: through his work at the InterContinental Residences Dubai Business Bay, he has created a number of events that don't just leave an impression on those attending, but helps them write a new memory. As a hotel marketeer, and for a team like this, Grover isn't just there to promote a brand – it's important to him to truly understand its identity, both as a destination, and in terms of what role a visit here could play in someone's life beyond its walls. To remind people that it's not just a place but an entity; a world where guests will feel captivated in the sense of goodwill, the care, and the warm welcome.

"One of my favourite books is by Will Guidara; it's called *Unreasonable Hospitality*. There's a quote in it that really resonates with me – it says that service is black and white, and hospitality is colour," says cluster and learning quality manager Karolina Carrasco. She explains that to her, and her team, this type of hospitality means welcoming every single guest the same way you would welcome someone to your home, with the same level of genuine thoughtfulness.

"Hospitality, to me, is more than just providing a service; it's about creating genuine connections and making people feel valued and cared for. It's about anticipating their needs, exceeding their expectations, and creating memorable experiences that stay with them long after they leave. True hospitality comes from the heart, and it's about going above and beyond to make every guest feel special," says Mahmoud. BT

IMAGES: INTERCONTINENTAL

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

Across the Middle East, female leaders are elevating hospitality to new heights. We explore some inspiring success stories from the region

Power & Poise

Over the past decade, the business landscape has changed dramatically when it comes to its spotlight on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies. The topic has become a matter of hot debate in recent years, and globally-renowned firms such as McKinsey and PwC have completed multiple studies researching the effect that such programmes have had on organisations in various industries. From a 2023 McKinsey study of 1,265 companies across 23 countries, a report presented a steady upward trend of women represented on executive teams. Meanwhile, a 2022 report from Diversity for Social Impact suggested that companies with the top levels of gender diversity on executive teams were 26 per cent more likely to outperform in terms of profitability. Yet figures also showed that in the global hospitality industry, only 33 per cent of senior management positions were held by women. In the U.S., although 52 per cent of all employees in the industry are held by women, only 36 occupied leadership roles. Similar figures were found in Canada, Japan, and Hong Kong. In the EU, women made up 41 per cent of hospitality management positions. In the Middle East's burgeoning hospitality industry, the proportion of women is on the rise. In Saudi, multiple programmes have been implemented to transform young women into the hospitality leaders of the future, while in the UAE, women from all over the world are making a significant impact in key roles in the sector. We spoke to an inspiring handful.

ANTONIA STUART

Antonia Stuart

Brand Director MEA, CA, EU

Rixos & All Inclusive Collection

Antonia leads brand strategy and creative direction, developing the brand standards and guidelines, while overseeing storytelling, design, content, and communications. She developed and launched the 'ALL Inclusive Collection' brand in 2023, establishing Rixos's brand function from the ground up in the Gulf and expanding it globally, with 53 resorts open and in the pipeline, creating the 'Rixos Residences' and 'Teen's Club' brands, and over 50 F&B concepts for Rixos.

She began with an agency background, collaborating with hospitality clients; "I was drawn to the industry's holistic nature, – encompassing diverse sectors and creating a self-contained ecosystem with a lifestyle focus. This dynamic environment, where no two days are the same, is both fun and vibrant, with storytelling at its core." Antonia's father worked in hospitality in the Middle East for decades, and further inspired her career path: "He really loved his job and the industry." At a young age, Antonia aspired to be a broadcast journalist, then a film director. "Recognising my innate ability to craft narratives, I realised my true calling was in brand management. This field allows me to adapt my storytelling across various mediums to create compelling brand experiences. Discovering brand management was a pivotal moment in my career," she says.

Antonia says that one of the most valuable pieces of career advice she's ever received is that "Your job will never love you back." She explains: "Early in my career, I dedicated myself entirely to my work, investing emotional, mental, and physical energy. This relentless commitment led to burnout, highlighting the importance of setting boundaries and prioritising self-care. I learned to establish a healthier work-life balance – this meant working smart and ensuring I properly rest and recover in my personal time, which is essential, especially for a creative role." Antonia hopes to be a chief brand officer for a global hospitality brand someday – "hopefully Rixos," she says – overseeing the creation of compelling brand narratives, managing brand identity, and leading cross-functional teams to deliver cohesive and impactful brand experiences. Her advice for others is to "[not] pigeonhole yourself too early, as your wants, needs and interests grow and evolve as you do. Master as many skills as you can while you are young to find out what inspires you, and form a solid foundation to enable flexibility and adaptability within your career."

Maren Kuehl

General Manager

Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort

Maren Kuehl has been a member of the Anantara family since 2014, when she began working as hotel manager for Anantara The Palm Dubai Resort, after gaining over two decades of experience in luxury hospitality across the region. In October 2021, she became general manager at Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort.

"I've always had a passion for making people feel comfortable and special, and the hospitality industry was a natural fit," she says. "The luxury hotel sector, in particular, offers an opportunity to create memorable, high-quality experiences. I enjoy the challenge of managing both the operational and emotional aspects of guest service. Over the years, I've found it very fulfilling to lead a team and see the positive impact we can have on our guests' experiences."

Maren believes that one special skill women bring to the table is high emotional intelligence: "Women are often more intuitive about people's needs, and in hospitality, this translates into exceptional guest service and team dynamics. Our ability to empathise and build strong relationships helps us create a supportive, welcoming environment that our guests and team members truly appreciate."

To anyone looking to follow in her footsteps, Maren would advise them to be confident and embrace their unique strengths. "Most importantly, always do what you are passionate about, build your network, work hard and continuously invest in your own growth. Develop your confidence, stay true to yourself and your values and have fun in what you do," she says. "If I could give one piece of advice to my younger self, it would be to trust the process and embrace setbacks as part of the journey. Early on, I focused too much on striving for perfection, but I've learned that mistakes and challenges are valuable opportunities for growth. I would also remind myself to be more confident in my decisions, knowing that sometimes others may not have all the answers, either. Trusting my instincts would have made me more resilient and self-assured at times."

→

MAREN KUEHL

Madisse Matar

Cluster Director of Sales and Marketing

InterContinental Residences Dubai Business Bay & Crowne Plaza Dubai Business Bay

With over 15 years of experience in the hospitality industry, Madisse is a seasoned professional who has continually delivered outstanding results across multiple key functions, including sales, marketing, revenue management and strategic business development. Her results-driven approach has earned her notable recognitions, including receiving the prestigious IHG “Sales Leader of the Year” award for the IMEA region in both 2018 and 2023. Madisse currently serves as the Cluster Director of Sales and Marketing for InterContinental Residences Dubai Business Bay and Crowne Plaza Dubai Business Bay. In this role, she is responsible for shaping and executing comprehensive commercial strategies across corporate, long-stay, government, and leisure segments. Her role extends to overseeing the entire sales and marketing function, including revenue generation, reservations, and performance reporting, ensuring alignment with the overarching goals of the properties. She also drives team recruitment, develops marketing strategies and ensures that each property is positioned effectively within the market.

MADISSE MATAR

Madisse says the best career advice she ever received was to invest in herself. “This means continuously developing your skills, seeking out new knowledge, and prioritising your well-being. By investing in yourself, you become a more valuable asset to your organisation and position yourself for greater opportunities,” she says. She believes one of a woman’s greatest powers is the ability to multitask easily, and always see the bigger picture. “I believe women embody a blend of empathy, intuition, and natural leadership that is invaluable in today’s business environment. We often excel at fostering strong relationships, building consensus, and creating inclusive teams where everyone feels valued and empowered. This creates a positive and productive work environment that drives success,” she says.

Her advice to others is to embrace their unique perspective and strengths. “Don't try to fit into the mould of a ‘male’ leadership style. Authenticity and confidence are key. Be assertive, voice your opinions, and don't be afraid to take calculated risks. Building a strong network of mentors and supporters is also crucial for overcoming challenges and celebrating successes,” she says.

Earle Enriquez

Marketing, PR & Communications Manager

Anantara Santorini Abu Dhabi Retreat

Earle is a creative and versatile marketer whose passion for experiential storytelling has taken her to renowned destinations, including the Maldives, Oman, and the UAE. Her leadership path has been rooted in inspiration and empowering others with creative freedom. Earle is boldly driven to establish herself as a Marcom powerhouse, championing the concept of “purposeful marketing.” Her mission is to share her expertise and create meaningful growth for herself and others aspiring to excel in the same field. A former blogger and stylist from the Philippines, Earle finds joy and inspiration in photography, dancing, and collecting memories through her travels.

Earle’s journey into the hospitality industry began in 2016, when she joined the pre-opening team at Anantara Salalah in Oman. “I was drawn to the opportunity to combine marketing with my passion for travel and visual storytelling,” she says. “[My first] experience was filled with learning and growth as I helped lay the marketing groundwork for the launch of a new luxury property. I found myself in an environment that valued creativity and connection. I’m grateful for the trust and support of my former leaders, and I aim to offer the same guidance and leadership to our younger team, just as my early mentors did for me.”

EARLE ENRIQUEZ

Earle believes that: “Women have the superpower to make the impossible look effortless! They turn their visions into creative realities and transform chaos into order, usually while remembering every detail. They have proven themselves to be dynamic, compassionate yet firm leaders with exceptional organisational skills, all while juggling diverse tasks and roles.

“I’m proud to see more and more women being celebrated in the industry for their unique perspectives, problem-solving approach, resilience, creativity, and ability to lead with a heart,” she says. “Be unapologetically confident in your abilities, cultivate your expertise, stay curious, and continuously learn. Surround yourself with mentors and allies who support and empower you, and don’t shy away from sharing your achievements. Stay inspired to succeed and don’t hold back from letting your voice shine,” she advises.

Alison Grinnell

CEO

RAK Hospitality Holding

Alison became CEO of RAK Hospitality Holding in 2019, having previously served as CFO. RAK Hospitality owns a portfolio of hotels within Ras Al Khaimah with several others in development across beach, desert, and mountain locations. It also owns and operates a diverse selection of hospitality and leisure assets and ancillary products throughout the emirate, including Jais Flight, the Bear Grylls Explorer Camp, restaurants, and a 2,000 unit purpose-built hospitality staff accommodation campus. Alison previously worked with PricewaterhouseCoopers in the UK, as well as leading its hotels practice in the Middle East.

For women looking to make their mark, Alison says, "Probably the most important thing is to ensure that you are standing out for the right reason. The skillset you bring may be same as a male colleague or it may be different; the key thing is to ensure you are using your skills to their best advantage. Don't be concerned about asking for help or delegating – neither of these are weaknesses, when done appropriately – and I have typically found that women are more willing to do this than men." Alison suggests focusing on what you can change and influence, and not letting yourself get overwhelmed on what is out of your control. "Stress is probably the most counterproductive emotion in the workplace (and for your own health). Having the self-awareness to appreciate there will be things you can't control helps to reduce the stress and be proactive in finding ways to mitigate these issues." If she could have given advice to her younger self, Alison would say: "Don't wait! Opportunities arise every day and are rarely taken because we are waiting for the 'right time' or we aren't 100% sure. I moved to the UAE in 2012; however, in hindsight I wish I had done it 10 years earlier, when an earlier occasion arose. I don't believe there is ever a perfect time for these decisions, and making them when it's not a perfect time makes things far more interesting!"

ALISON GRINNELL

Jaime Simpson

General Manager

Jumeirah Mina Al Salam

Award-winning hotelier Jaime arrived in the UAE in 2020, following previous roles with an InterContinental property in Oman, with the 2020 G20 Summit in Saudi Arabia, with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in Australia, and for Hyatt properties in Australia and Asia. Growing up, she didn't have a specific dream job in mind, but she always knew she wanted a career that would allow her to explore the world, immerse herself in different cultures, and connect deeply with people. "This desire to experience life beyond my own environment and build meaningful relationships became my compass, driving me toward opportunities that align with those values and passions. It's shaped not only my career but also how I view success, measured in experiences and connections rather than titles," she says. Despite her notable success, Jaime says the greatest challenge of her career has been navigating self-doubt and imposter syndrome. "Early in my career, I often doubted my abilities and struggled to fully embrace my potential. I overcame this by building confidence through preparation, celebrating small wins, and seeking mentorship. Surrounding myself with supportive colleagues and focusing on my accomplishments helped shift my mindset. I learned that challenges are opportunities for growth, approaching them with resilience and assurance. In top-performing organisations, where everyone excels, standing out requires more than a good reputation, it demands cultivating a deliberate personal brand. While reputation reflects credibility, a personal brand emphasises the values you intentionally showcase." She cites strategy, confidence, and resilience as key traits for standing out in a traditionally male-dominated industry, with the latter being "one of the greatest superpowers women bring to the table." She explains: "Women have an incredible ability to adapt, persevere, and thrive in the face of challenges. This resilience often goes hand-in-hand with emotional intelligence, empathy, and the ability to build strong relationships, which are critical for navigating complex situations and fostering collaboration."

JAIME SIMPSON

CAROLINE JONSSON

Caroline Jonsson

Area PR & Communications Manager, Middle East & Southeast Asia Pacific

Radisson Hotel Group

Originally hailing from Sweden, Caroline Jonsson has over 15 years of experience in Dubai's vibrant hospitality scene and has spent the last seven years with Radisson Hotel Group. With a strong background in brand storytelling, PR, and guest experience innovation, she excels at elevating brand narratives and crafting authentic connections. She is dedicated to continuous learning and creative problem-solving, bringing fresh perspectives to a dynamic industry.

Caroline was fascinated by the hospitality industry long before she became a part of it. "Ever since I was young, I've been fascinated by hotels, not just for their design and the memories they initiated on my travels, but for the vibrant life they bring to every moment. I love watching a bustling lobby come alive, travellers checking in, guests admiring the decor, and memories being created with every smile and hello. There's an undeniable excitement in the constant flow of people on the move, each with their own story and destination," she says.

Now, if she could give a piece of advice to her younger self, Caroline would say to: "Always take a moment to appreciate where you are, and not sweat the small stuff. It's easy to get caught up in the rush of deadlines and setbacks, but every step, even the imperfect ones, is part of your journey. Learning to pause, reflect, and celebrate the little wins can make all the difference in building resilience and joy. In the end, it's these small moments that fuel lasting progress."

Caroline adds that the best piece of career advice that she had ever received was to always stay curious and open. "Being willing to learn and try new things has been a game changer for me, especially in an industry that's always evolving. Embracing fresh ideas and stepping outside my comfort zone not only fueled personal growth but also unlocked unexpected opportunities. This approach has kept me agile and ready to tackle challenges with a mindset that values continuous improvement," she says.

Olesia Ostapenko-Majid

Director of Operations

W Dubai-Mina Seyahi

Olesia Ostapenko-Majid joined W Dubai - Mina Seyahi as director of operations from a prior role as executive assistant manager of rooms at Marriott Resort Palm Jumeirah, where she led pre-opening strategies and ensured brand alignment. Known for her results-driven leadership, Olesia has earned a reputation for strategic insights that drive revenue growth and enhance guest experiences globally. With extensive experience at top brands like Hyatt and Marriott, she has improved guest satisfaction, operational efficiency, and revenue across properties in Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. She excels in developing high-performance teams and aligning business objectives with brand goals, consistently driving growth and operational excellence.

OLESIA OSTAPENKO-MAJID

Olesia's first leadership role was as housekeeping manager at a Hyatt hotel at the age of 21. "It was a pivotal moment in my career, as I was recognised as the youngest Housekeeping leader in the company at the time. I was entrusted with the exciting responsibility of opening a brand-new 186-room hotel, which involved not only ensuring the highest standards from day one, but also building my team from scratch. The process was incredibly challenging but equally rewarding. I learned invaluable lessons in leadership, team-building, and problem-solving that have shaped the way I approach my work to this day. It truly set the foundation for my growth in the hospitality industry." Olesia believes that building your personal brand is crucial in today's competitive landscape. "It's about more than just what you do; it is about how you do it. A 'can-do' attitude is essential – it shapes your approach to challenges and opportunities alike. Leading by example is key, as it inspires others and sets a standard for excellence."

Olesia also believes one of the greatest superpowers women possess is emotional intelligence. "[It] allows us to navigate complex situations with empathy and understanding. This, combined with our remarkable ability to multitask, enables women to balance both professional and personal lives seamlessly. Whether running a large business or leading a team, women excel at handling high-pressure environments. Yet, after a long day at work, we are equally capable of transitioning into our roles as wives and mothers, continuing to care for our families with the same level of dedication. It's this unique blend of strength, emotional insight, and adaptability that truly sets women apart and drives their success both at work and at home," she says.

Samita Panda

Executive Housekeeper

Anantara Mina Al Arab

Samita Panda brings over 18 years of experience in housekeeping operations to her current role. She began as a room attendant, working her way through every position to gain an in-depth understanding of each role's nuances. Having worked with some of the world's leading luxury hotel brands including Kempinski, St Regis and Sofitel, Samita has gained a reputation for upholding the highest standards of service, and unparalleled cleanliness and comfort while fostering a culture of teamwork and dedication. "Growing up, I was fascinated by the way hotel team members were always so well-groomed and carried themselves professionally, which left a lasting impression. At hotel management school, one of my professors encouraged me to specialise in housekeeping operations. Her guidance and passion for the field motivated me to explore this path, and I am deeply grateful for her influence. Housekeeping has since become my true passion, allowing me to combine my love for precision, organisation, and creating exceptional guest experiences," she says. "When I began my career, I was keen to focus exclusively on tasks directly related to my job. A mentor urged me to step outside my comfort zone and learn from every aspect of the workplace. By shadowing colleagues in various departments and observing the challenges faced by different teams, I gained invaluable insights that accelerated my professional growth. This taught me to embrace new experiences and highlighted how learning from both positive and negative situations can enrich my career. It has profoundly influenced my approach to leadership, problem-solving, and adaptability."

SAMITA PANDA

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Samita faced one of her greatest challenges, all while leading the housekeeping team during a hotel brand conversion: "With severe staff shortages, tight deadlines, and strict government guidelines, all while keeping the hotel operational, it was a real test. I learnt the importance of adaptability, pro-active planning, and effective communication. By setting clear priorities and fostering teamwork, we kept things running smoothly and maintained high service standards. I gained a deep appreciation for how resilient my team was and the value of trust and empowerment. These lessons have truly strengthened my leadership skills."

MARLOES KNIPPENBERG

Marloes Knippenberg

CEO

Kerten Hospitality

Marloes Knippenberg is a visionary hospitality leader who has redefined industry standards by integrating ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) principles into the core operations. Her strategic expertise has transformed Kerten Hospitality into a global lifestyle group with 57+ diverse projects. Passionate about talent development, Marloes champions industry innovation and sustainability. As an ambassador for the Global Hospitality Student Challenge, she connects industry leaders with future changemakers, driving growth, collaboration, and meaningful impact across communities worldwide.

"My journey into hospitality wasn't something I planned from the start. When my family moved to a small town in the south of the Netherlands, I was fortunate to meet some incredible people. It was that experience – the unique mix of people, place, and timing – that first sparked my interest in hospitality," she says. Marloes later joined Hotelschool The Hague, which had a strict acceptance process, admitting only a small number of students each year. As graduation approached, she was shortlisted by both Hilton and Hyatt to join their management programmes.

"What I love most about the hospitality industry is the authenticity of the connections – people often choose to do business simply because they genuinely like each other. It's that sense of real, human connection that makes this industry so special. One of the best pieces of career advice I received was that passion and drive matter more than age, title, or gender. That mindset has stayed with me throughout my journey, encouraging me to focus on learning, delivering results, and stepping into new challenges," she says, adding: "Nowadays, I see many people get caught up in titles, striving for perfection, or they become easily bored if things aren't moving fast enough. But in an industry like hospitality – which is constantly evolving, growing, and innovating – there's always room to learn and contribute. If you take ownership, step outside your comfort zone, and give your best to whatever task you have, you'll find opportunities to grow, learn, and succeed." In 10 years, she hopes to still be leading Kerten Hospitality into the next chapter, wherein it aims to have grown to over 10,000 keys globally, with mixed use communities being at the heart of the travel experience. →

Soha Zahar

General Manager

Holiday Inn & Suites Dubai Science Park

Soha began her hospitality career 23 years ago at InterContinental Le Vendôme Beirut and InterContinental Phoenicia Beirut, specialising in reservations and revenue management. She has held key commercial roles, including area director of revenue for Lebanon and cluster director of sales and marketing for IHG Jordan. In 2014, she transitioned into a corporate role as revenue performance director, overseeing 50 hotels across MEA. In 2018, Soha led the pre-opening of Staybridge Suites Doha Lusail as general manager, positioning it as a leading boutique long-stay property. During her Qatar assignment, she also contributed to the FIFA World Cup. Soha has previously worked with Four Seasons Hotels in Lebanon and Rotana's Corporate Office. A certified professional coach, she speaks Arabic, French, and Italian. In her free time, she enjoys travelling, painting, and playing tennis.

"I've always been passionate about creating memorable experiences for people. The hospitality industry allows me to combine my love for service, business strategy, and team leadership. The corporate role gave me a strong foundation, but being on the ground as a general manager let me see the direct impact of my work," she says. Soha believes that women offer a unique ability to balance empathy with decisiveness. "In hospitality, this is a superpower because it allows us to connect with guests on a personal level while also making tough business decisions that drive success." She adds: "I would tell my younger self to embrace every opportunity to learn, even if it feels outside her comfort zone. Early in my career, I hesitated to take on certain challenges, but I've since realised that those experiences were crucial to my growth as a leader. I'd tell my younger self to be confident in her abilities and to seek out opportunities to showcase her leadership skills. To build a strong network of mentors and allies, and not shy away from taking on challenging roles. In hospitality, your ability to connect with people and deliver results will speak for itself."

SOHA ZAHAR

Farah Bootwala

Marketing Manager

Taj Dubai

With an impressive career spanning over a decade in lifestyle marketing, Farah Bootwala brings a unique blend of creativity, strategic vision, and a deep understanding of audience engagement to her role. Known for her innovative campaigns and ability to craft compelling brand narratives, she is passionate about storytelling, sustainability, and authentic guest experiences. When she's not orchestrating marketing campaigns, Farah is an avid traveller and culture enthusiast, constantly seeking inspiration from the vibrant art, culinary, and design scenes around the world. Farah believes that emotional intelligence is a particular strength of women, which she describes as the ability to understand, manage, and use emotions to build strong relationships and lead with empathy. "But honestly, I think our real superpower is multitasking! We juggle careers, families, friendships, and somehow still know where everything in the house is (even when no one else does!). We navigate boardrooms and bedtime stories, lead meetings and meal preps, and keep everything running smoothly," she says. Farah adds that her ability to balance multiple roles while staying strategic and resilient has been a huge advantage. "It helps me problem-solve, think creatively, and bring people together. I've also been lucky to work in an environment that champions female empowerment. At Taj, under the leadership of Saurabh Tiwari and IHCL, there are amazing initiatives that support women in negotiation, leadership, and growth mindset. Being part of a company that invests in women has played a big role in shaping my journey." Figuring out what she really wanted to do was once a major challenge for Farah. She started in editorial, before moving on to sales, and it was when she landed in marketing in PR that she found her calling. In 2022, she made the jump into hospitality, that came with its own learning curve as well as an incredible mentor: Gregory Laguesse, her former marketing director. Farah has learned that standing out

FARAH BOOTWALA

"isn't about trying to be louder than everyone else – it's about knowing your worth, trusting your instincts, and backing yourself with preparation and research. Confidence isn't about shouting the loudest – it's about speaking with conviction and owning your space. At the end of the day, success isn't just about working harder – it's about working smarter. Women have this incredible ability to blend intuition with strategy, and when we trust that, we can accomplish some pretty amazing things. So, my advice? Stay adaptable, embrace the challenges, and don't be afraid to take up space – we belong here."

Stacey McMurtrie

Director of Marketing & Communications

Marriott Resort Palm Jumeirah, Dubai

With over a decade of experience shaping hospitality marketing in the UAE, Stacey McMurtrie is a driving force behind some of the region's most successful hotel and restaurant launches. She has overseen the opening of the region's first Marriott Hotels-branded resort, spearheaded innovative campaigns, and built thriving F&B brands. A multi-award-winning leader, she is known for her strategic prowess, digital acumen, stunt marketing and ability to craft campaigns that not only drive revenue but also shape a brand's legacy. Beyond the boardroom, Stacey's resilience has been tested by an unexpected battle – facing thyroid cancer three times. But with unwavering determination, she continues to redefine success, inspiring the industry with both her leadership and her unbreakable spirit.

"Hospitality is in my DNA," Stacey says. "My journey began at just 12 years old when my family acquired a beautiful accommodation property in South Australia. From housekeeping to hosting guests and representing our business at local trade shows, I experienced firsthand the magic of warm hospitality. But even then, my heart was set on marketing – the art of storytelling and creating experiences that people remember." She continues: "By 16, I was on a path to make that dream a reality, enrolling in the International College of Hotel Management and completing placements in Sydney and Dubai. The latter stole my heart, and in 2010, I took my first step into the industry at Jumeirah Beach Hotel. From there, my career evolved through Emaar Hospitality and The Ritz-Carlton, ultimately leading me to Marriott Resort Palm Jumeirah, where I had the honour of launching and leading the marketing, PR, and Comms for the brand's 50th property in the UAE. It's been a journey of passion, persistence, and a lot of late nights – but I wouldn't have it any other way." Early in her career, Stacey was told she was "too loud, too emotional, too much. Over time, I realised that these traits – my ability to connect, to lead with heart, to show up fully as myself – were actually my greatest strengths," she says.

STACEY MCMURTRIE

Launching a landmark property like Marriott Resort Palm Jumeirah was a formidable challenge, yet she thrives on challenges. "But my greatest test wasn't in a boardroom. It was being diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Not once. Not twice. But three times," she reflects. "There is nothing quite as destabilising as hearing the word 'cancer' out of the blue, let alone having it return. But through every surgery, every recovery, every moment of uncertainty, I have been lifted by the strength of my Dubai family, my incredible team, and the unwavering support of those around me. This journey has reshaped my outlook. It has reinforced that success isn't just about business wins; it's about resilience, about showing up every day, and about creating an impact that lasts beyond a campaign. Today, as I continue to lead, create, and inspire, I do so knowing that the toughest battles forge the strongest leaders," she says.

"Women bring an innate ability to balance emotional intelligence with strategic thinking, making them powerful leaders. We nurture teams, build relationships, and drive business with an intuition that's impossible to replicate. And most importantly, when we embrace who we truly are, we inspire others to do the same. So my advice? Own your voice. Be unapologetically you. Authenticity is always in style," Stacey concludes. BT

Beyond Borders:
How eSIMs are keeping GCC travellers connected worldwide

The evolution of eSIM technolgy is changing the game for travellers from the GCC and beyond, breaking traditional barriers in travelling abroad

SAMI NASHWAN
GROUP CHIEF GROWTH OFFICER, BEYOND ONE

Since their introduction in smartphones in 2018, eSIMs have evolved from a novel feature to an increasingly essential tool for international travellers.

As Apple, Samsung, and other major manufacturers make eSIM technology standard in their latest devices, outbound travellers from the GCC are discovering a solution to one of their biggest travel pain points: staying connected abroad without incurring enormous roaming charges.

The technology's mainstream adoption comes at a key moment for the region's international travellers. The World Travel and Tourism Council's 2024 research reveals the scale of GCC outbound travel, with international visitor spending projected to reach US$151.1 billion this year – a striking 43.8% increase from 2019 levels. This surge reflects not just economic recovery, but a fundamental shift in how Gulf residents engage with the world.

Traditional roaming barriers have long frustrated GCC travellers abroad. Consider Maha, a Saudi content creator whose weekend in Istanbul resulted in a shocking bill from simple social media updates. Such stories are becoming outdated as major carriers and innovative companies like Virgin Connect and Airalo expand their eSIM offerings, allowing travellers to download local data packages instantly before they even board their flights.

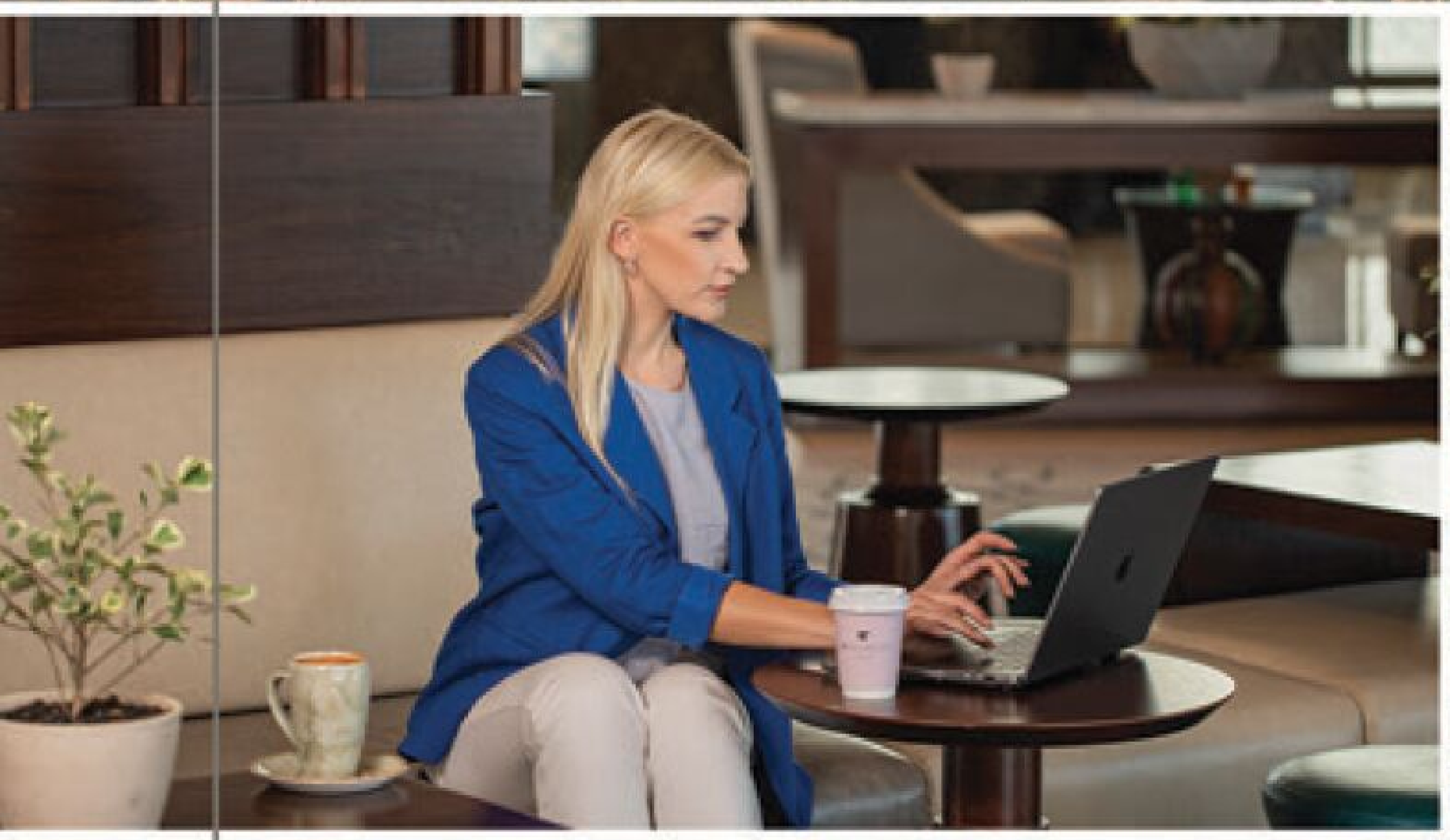
The technology's maturation perfectly complements the rise of remote work and digital nomadism among GCC – and international – professionals. As flexible work becomes standard, seamless global connectivity transforms from luxury to necessity. Financial analysts from Dubai now confidently conduct video calls from London coffee shops, while creative professionals seamlessly manage their teams from co-working spaces in Singapore or Seoul.

IMAGE: BEYOND ONE; LOOKER_STUDIO/ADOBE STOCK

The impact extends far beyond business convenience. As GCC residents increasingly travel for leisure – with international leisure spending now dominating travel expenditure – reliable connectivity becomes essential for maintaining cultural and family bonds while abroad. From sharing experiences with family through high-quality video calls to using apps for finding halal restaurants in foreign cities or maintaining prayer schedules across time zones, eSIM technology helps preserve cultural connections while enabling new experiences.

Looking ahead, as eSIM adoption continues to grow – with industry experts projecting 60% of global smartphone connections to be eSIM-capable by 2025 – the technology will further reshape how Gulf residents explore and engage with the world. Young professionals from across the GCC increasingly view international travel not as occasional trips but as an integral part of their lifestyle, requiring seamless connectivity wherever they go.

For the region's growing community of global travellers, eSIM technology arrives at the perfect moment. Through mature technologies like eSIMs, GCC travellers don't just explore the world – they stay meaningfully connected to their communities while building bridges to new ones. As outbound travel from the region continues its remarkable growth trajectory, the ability to stay effortlessly connected transforms not just how we travel, but how we experience the world beyond our borders.



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Unlocking the power of rest: The future of sleep tourism

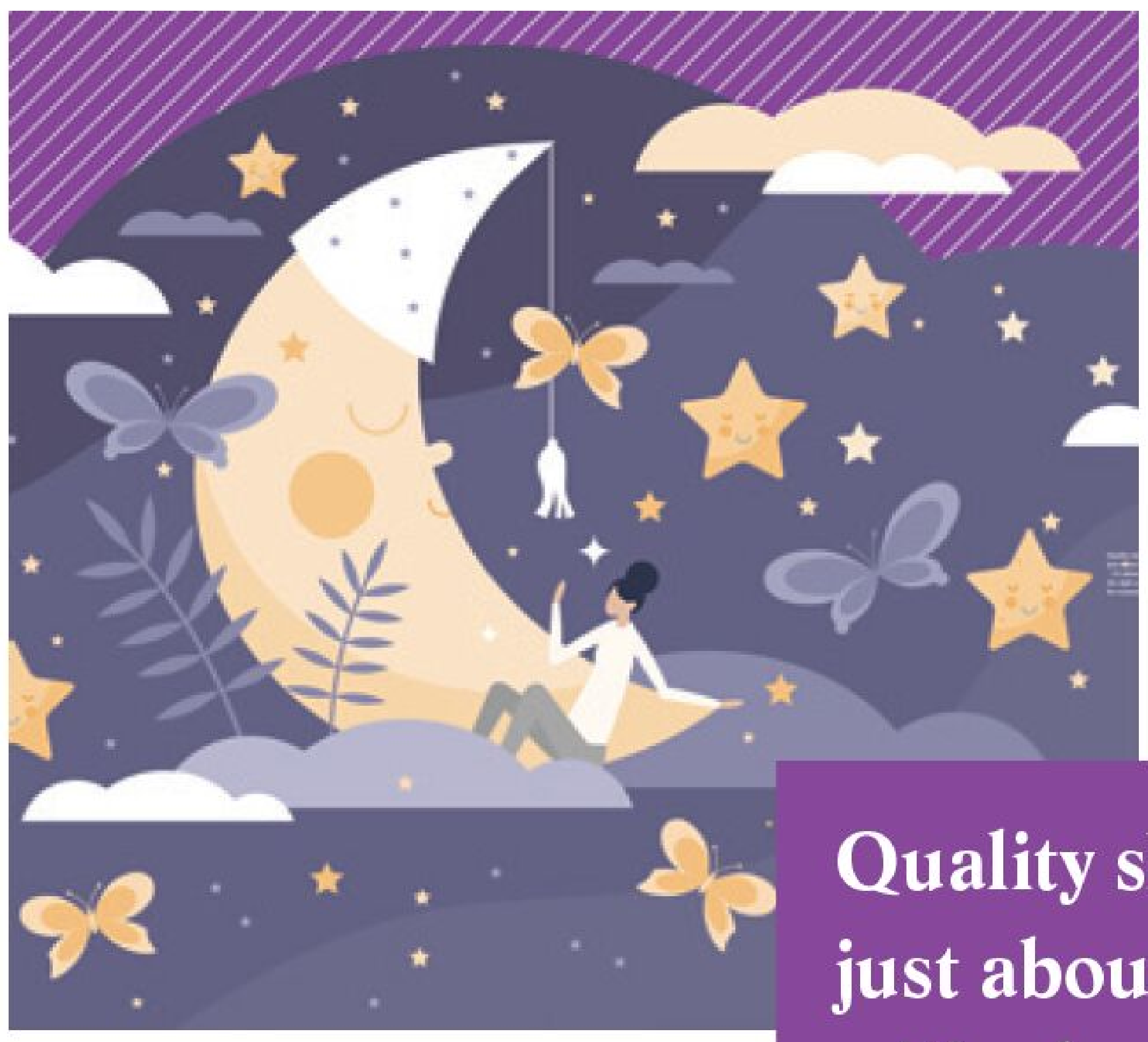
In today's fast-paced world, where the demands of busy modern life can impact overall well-being, quality sleep has become a universal aspiration

ADRIAN MESSERLI
PRESIDENT OF HOTEL OPERATIONS - EUROPE, MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA, FOUR SEASONS

Sleep is the cornerstone of well-being, essential for restoring our minds and bodies. Yet, as a recent GCC-wide Four Seasons-commissioned YouGov survey highlights, achieving consistent, quality rest remains elusive for many. With 24 per cent of respondents sleeping less than six hours a night and common symptoms like fatigue (58%) and low energy (52%) widespread, it's not surprising that sleep tourism is on the rise.

Having spent over two decades in the hospitality industry, from Switzerland to Dubai and beyond, I've seen firsthand how integral restful sleep is to a guest's experience. Whether working in bustling urban cities such as Cairo or Shanghai, or beachside retreats in Sharm El Sheikh, the Seychelles, or the Caribbean, I've seen how guests value spaces designed to promote genuine rest. These observations align closely with the findings of the survey, where GCC travellers emphasised high-quality mattresses (62%), temperature control (61%), and soundproofing (53%) as the most important hotel features for sleep.

The concept of sleep tourism goes beyond just providing a comfortable bed – it's about offering holistic environments that address modern challenges. For instance, regional sleep data shows that women placed greater importance on sleep (67%) than men (59%), providing opportunity for more tailored amenities and experiences that address different preferences. Similarly, married individuals with children prioritise sleep (65%) more than singles (55%), pointing to an opportunity for sleeping environments that consider the various needs of all the family.



> **Quality sleep isn't just about duration – it's about creating the right conditions for restorative rest**

Multi-bedroom residences are a perfect example of accommodations designed to cater to the needs of travelling families, yet beyond the physical layout that provides space and comfort for all, it is the customised offerings as an extension of the property that provides the sense of reassurance to families for them to enjoy a seamless stay. For example, access to world-class amenities, dedicated residential teams, customised itineraries, private chefs, and personalised service every step of the way.

During a recent visit to one of our resorts, I noticed that guests arriving jet-lagged from long-haul flights would seek immediate rest. It was through thoughtful design elements and experiential offerings, such as blackout curtains and calming rituals, that guests would be able to find timely rejuvenation from their travels and truly begin to enjoy their time on vacation. These elements aren't just niceties – they're solutions to challenges faced by modern travellers. The findings of the survey provide a roadmap for how the hospitality industry can embrace this evolution. As guests increasingly seek wellness-driven stays, the opportunity lies in creating more than just a place to sleep – it's about curating transformative environments that prioritise health and rejuvenation.

Throughout my career and especially in my current role, I have experienced firsthand the pace of constant travel – crossing time zones and needing to quickly adjust to new environments. Time zone hopping adds an additional layer of complexity, as the body struggles to find equilibrium amidst fluctuating schedules and disrupted circadian rhythms. In such a dynamic lifestyle, finding the right cadence to allow the body the time and rest it deserves is both an art and a necessity. I've learned that quality sleep isn't just about duration; it's about creating the right conditions for deep, restorative rest. The ability to reset is crucial – not just for productivity, but for overall well-being. This understanding reinforces my belief in the power of sleep tourism, not as a luxury, but as an essential pillar of modern travel that enables guests to recalibrate, recharge, and truly embrace the journey ahead.

As the industry adapts to these changing priorities, the question isn't whether we can meet the demand for better sleep, but how we can continually innovate to make rest a cornerstone of travel. After all, sleep is one of the few luxuries we will always need, and there is no better time to unlock its power than now.

IMAGES: FOUR SEASONS; VECTORMINE/ADOBE STOCK

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AIR MILES WITH

Ollie Ollerton

Author, global speaker, and founder of Break-Point Academy

INTERVIEW YI-HWA HANNA

What do you wish everyone would know about survival? The most important thing is that regardless of the advances in technology, we all have to be aware of our primal coding, which is our instinct to survive. Our minds are programmed for survival not success, and we must appreciate this in order to flourish within the complexities of this modern world.

What's something people would be surprised to realise about life-or-death situations? That we have far more potential then we are led to believe, especially when we allow our instincts to take over. Provided we learn to embrace the chaos, whilst controlling our fear, our actions become instinctive and we perform in a way we never thought possible in order to survive.

You were on the directing staff for the UK's Channel 4's *SAS: Who Dares Wins*. What was unique about the show? It was the first TV show in the UK about the Special Forces where we openly revealed our faces and identities and were thrown from the shadows into the spotlight. The framework of the show had also never been done before – taking civilians with no military background and putting them through elements of Special Forces Selection to see if they had what it takes.

Why do you think it resonated with audiences? The show was [primarily] about human psychology and the battles that we all face. Initially, the recruits on the show were male, so it shone a light on men's mental health issues and PTSD and encouraged people watching to speak up and address their own struggles. It also showed the vulnerability of those that serve in the military; a side that is often overlooked.

Your latest book is called *How To Survive Almost Anything*. What can readers expect? It's a modern day survival bible. I pass on all the specialist skills, knowledge, and mindset learnt over the course of a life that has experienced some of the world's toughest conditions and most hostile situations: whether that [was my time] serving in the Special Forces or mountaineering in the ice-capped Himalayas. This guide meticulously teaches you how to prepare your instincts, ready your mentality, and hone your survival skills so that you have the tools and know-how to survive whatever comes next.

Tell us about your non-fiction books. *Break Point* is my autobiography. It tells my story from the age of 10 after I had a freak accident and was attacked by a circus chimp, which defined my path into adulthood. It highlights the various battles I faced (both in and out of the military) more so with myself than any war. *Battle Ready* is the process I went through to transform my destructive nature into a journey of self-empowerment. It's a step-by-step guide to eliminate self-doubt, embrace courage, and transform your life.

You've also written two fiction books. What inspired you to write these? Storytelling is the best medium to deliver a message. I use that platform to elaborate the stories of my own experiences and highlight personal and global issues apparent in the world today.

You do a lot of charity work. Why is it important to you to give back? I believe I was given the gift of my exposure on TV for a reason, and I feel it's our duty to support humanity. Being of service to others is a gift.

How do you like to spend your vacation time? Being active. I love to climb mountains, skydive, ride motorbikes, and discover places that are off the beaten track. That being said, I do believe it's important to rest, recalibrate, and refocus after busy periods. However, the comfort zone is no place for permanent residency! My ideal holiday is sailing around the Greek islands as I love the water and escaping the crowds.

What are three things that you always pack? A torch, a dive knife, and a small first aid kit.

What is your earliest memory of a holiday as a child? I seemed to find trouble in all of my childhood holidays! However, a memory that always stands out is when I caught myself with a fishing rod and had to have the hook removed from my thigh. Despite this, there are many happy memories [with] lots of laughs amidst the mayhem. My poor parents!

What is your go-to in-flight entertainment? I love catching up with a good thriller film or scary movie as my wife hates them and I can never watch them at home!

How do you spend your air miles? Upgrading to business class!

What's your ultimate bucket list destination? Göbekli Tepe, a Neolithic settlement believed to be more than 10,000 years old, and any similar sites around the word that question our origins. I'd also love to venture back to Egypt and see the pyramids again, as an adult. I don't think I appreciated what they were all about when I first saw them as a 14-year-old schoolboy. BT

IMAGES: SUPPLIED; OLLIEOLLERTON.COM

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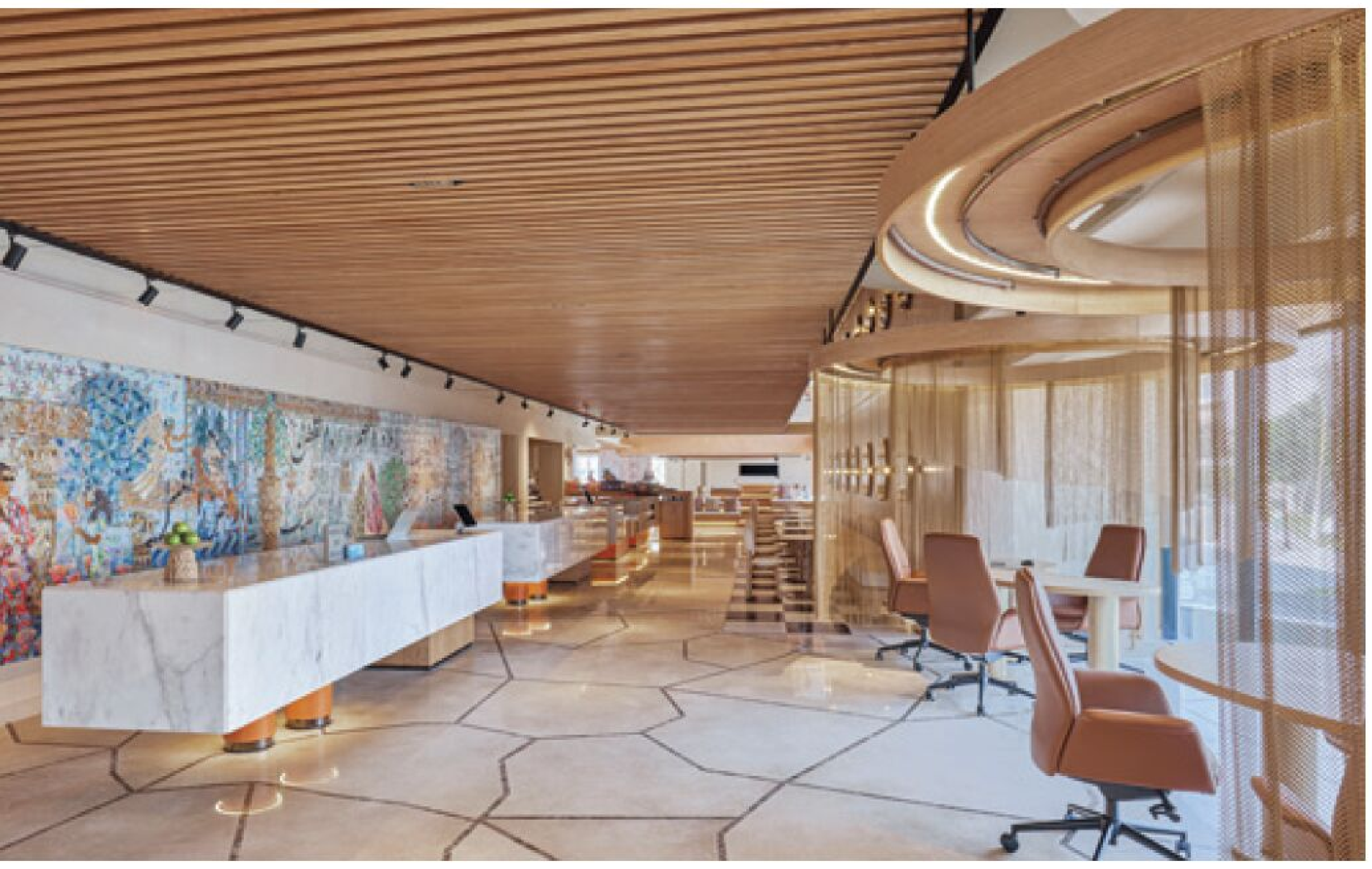

THE ELEVATOR PITCH

Business Traveller Middle East gives **Amr Ghazy**, hotel manager of Hyatt Centric Cairo West, five minutes to pitch his property to prospective guests

"On 24 October 2024, we proudly introduced Hyatt Centric Cairo West, Cairo's first art lifestyle hotel – a game-changer in Egypt's hospitality scene that blends contemporary design, cultural immersion, and unparalleled comfort. For me, this journey has been about creating a space where guests can not only stay but also connect with art, culture, and the vibrant pulse of Cairo.

When we unveiled Hyatt Centric Cairo West, our vision was to create a destination where hospitality transcends functionality and becomes an experience of discovery. The hotel's concept was inspired by the dynamic energy of Cairo – a city where history, culture, and innovation converge – and we brought this vision to life through a meticulous blend of artistic expression, contemporary design, and thoughtful service.

Located near the Grand Egyptian Museum and the Pyramids of Giza, Hyatt Centric Cairo West is more than a hotel; it's a celebration of Egyptian artistry. The property is a masterpiece created in collaboration with 11 talented local artists, who infused their vision into bold murals, interactive installations, and immersive artworks, transforming our hotel into a living gallery. From the moment guests arrive, they are welcomed into an environment that celebrates creativity and sets the tone for an unforgettable journey.

Our 306 guestrooms and suites redefine contemporary comfort with an artistic soul. As our guests' journey continues, the artistic experience follows them into their personal space. Every wall is surrounded with art pieces that invite you to engage and become part of their story. Even the bathroom door isn't just functional; it's an art wall, seamlessly transforming every corner of the space into a masterpiece. One of the standout elements inside each guestroom and suite is the baboon motif – a majestic figure and advisor to the Ancient Egyptian Sun God, Ra, depicted with its hands raised in celebration of a new day. Our suites feature leisure amenities including a separate living area for relaxation, or a private terrace with breathtaking views of the pool or the Giza Pyramids, or a private spa bath within the comfort of your suite.

Dining at our hotel is an experience that's as creative as its design. The main restaurant, Muse, serves global cuisines in a setting filled with striking paintings, sculptures, and installations. The Grab N' Go Market offers fresh and convenient bites, while the Twenty-Four Bar blends the hotel's artful ambiance with the perfect backdrop for speciality coffee or casual meetings. Poolside, the Rizz Pool Bar elevates relaxation with refreshing drinks, tropical mocktails, and light bites, all enjoyed in a sun-soaked oasis.

One of our most distinctive features that sets our hotel apart is our Podcast & E-Guitar studio, which we designed as a creative hub for music-lovers and content creators. It's a space where guests can explore their passions and create something meaningful. Adding to the vibrant atmosphere, our expansive pool area features Cairo's only in-pool billiard table and a DJ booth to keep the energy alive. The Aqua Gym features the latest water workout equipment, and the fully-equipped gym offers indoor and outdoor spaces with poolside views. Families can enjoy the Kids Club, where daily activities keep young explorers entertained. These cutting-edge facilities reflect our commitment to offering something extraordinary for our guests.

I am proud to be part of this pivotal moment in Cairo's evolution, and to offer a space where every guest feels fully immersed in the beauty, creativity, and energy of our remarkable city. At Hyatt Centric Cairo West, our commitment goes beyond providing a stay – we strive to inspire a renewed sense of wonder. Whether you're seeking inspiration, discovery, or connection, our hotel is the perfect starting point.

IMAGES: HYATT CENTRIC CAIRO WEST

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The inside scoop

Research shows that people prefer to purchase from a brand they recognise – and will pay more to work with people they consider to be an "elite expert". We learn more about the power of a personal brand

You've been nicknamed "The Customer Whisperer" – why is this so, and what does it mean to you?

It reflects my ability to cut through the noise and understand what customers are really saying. Over the years, I've developed a knack for seeing patterns in behaviour and helping businesses translate that into meaningful action. It's a title given to me through my broadcasting work (I have appeared on over 2,000 documentaries and programmes on global media), yet I wear the title proudly because it encapsulates my commitment to always putting the consumer first.

The power of the personal brand is constantly growing. Why is this?

Trust, authenticity and relatability have become consumer currency. In a world overwhelmed by choice, people gravitate toward individuals and businesses they feel connected to. A personal brand allows you to tell your story, share your values, and create genuine connections. It's not just about standing out – it's about standing for values that matter.

What's the key difference between branding and marketing?

Branding is the who, marketing is the how. Your brand is your identity – what you stand for and how people perceive you. Marketing is the vehicle that brings that identity to life for your audience. One is the heart; the other is the voice. Combined, they become your signature.

What's driving consumer behaviour?

There's been a seismic shift toward values-driven spending. Consumers are holding brands accountable for sustainability, inclusivity, and transparency. At the same time, convenience and personalisation are non-negotiables. We've also seen a rise in "experiential retail"– where the store is not just a place to buy, but a destination to connect and experience. That has been significant in my journey with the launch of the leading retail concept Future Stores.

Why is it essential for brands to know their customers better?

Your customers are the lifeblood of your business. Without understanding their needs, behaviours, and desires, you're just guessing. When you truly know your audience, you can create products, services, and experiences that resonate – and build loyalty that lasts.

What are some ways they can do so?

Listen: Conduct focus groups, surveys, and interviews to understand their needs. **Be present:** Observe customer behaviour in real-world settings. **Analyse deeply:** Don't just collect data, it is not enough – ensure to dig deeper to uncover true insights. There are some true business horror stories from major brands that relied only on the data.

What are your top tips for building a strong personal brand?

Find your purpose: Understand what you stand for and why it matters. **Show up consistently:** Across platforms, in tone, and in actions and in real life. In many green-rooms I have witnessed the 'true' personality behind beloved personalities. It must be exhausting to uphold a false persona. **Add value:** Make every interaction meaningful, whether it's a post, a talk, or a conversation.

How can a brand stand out?

Don't try to copy the competition. Instead, focus on your strengths, your story, and your unique perspective. Authenticity and clarity will always cut through the noise and do not be afraid of what may seem to be a 'niche'. Being an expert, and sound and reliable resource with true knowledge has value.

How can someone stay authentic in their personal branding?

By being selective and intentional. Share content that reflects your values and genuinely connects with your audience. Avoid trying to please everyone – it's better to be deeply meaningful to a smaller group than superficially appealing to the masses. As I always say, don't try shouting your message in a football crowd.

What's the biggest mistake people make in their personal branding?

Not defining their narrative. If you don't control the story, someone else will. Your personal brand should clearly communicate who you are, what you do, and why it matters. Also don't worry about saying no to things that others try to persuade you is a 'big deal' – once you are clear on your purpose, you will know what is right for you.

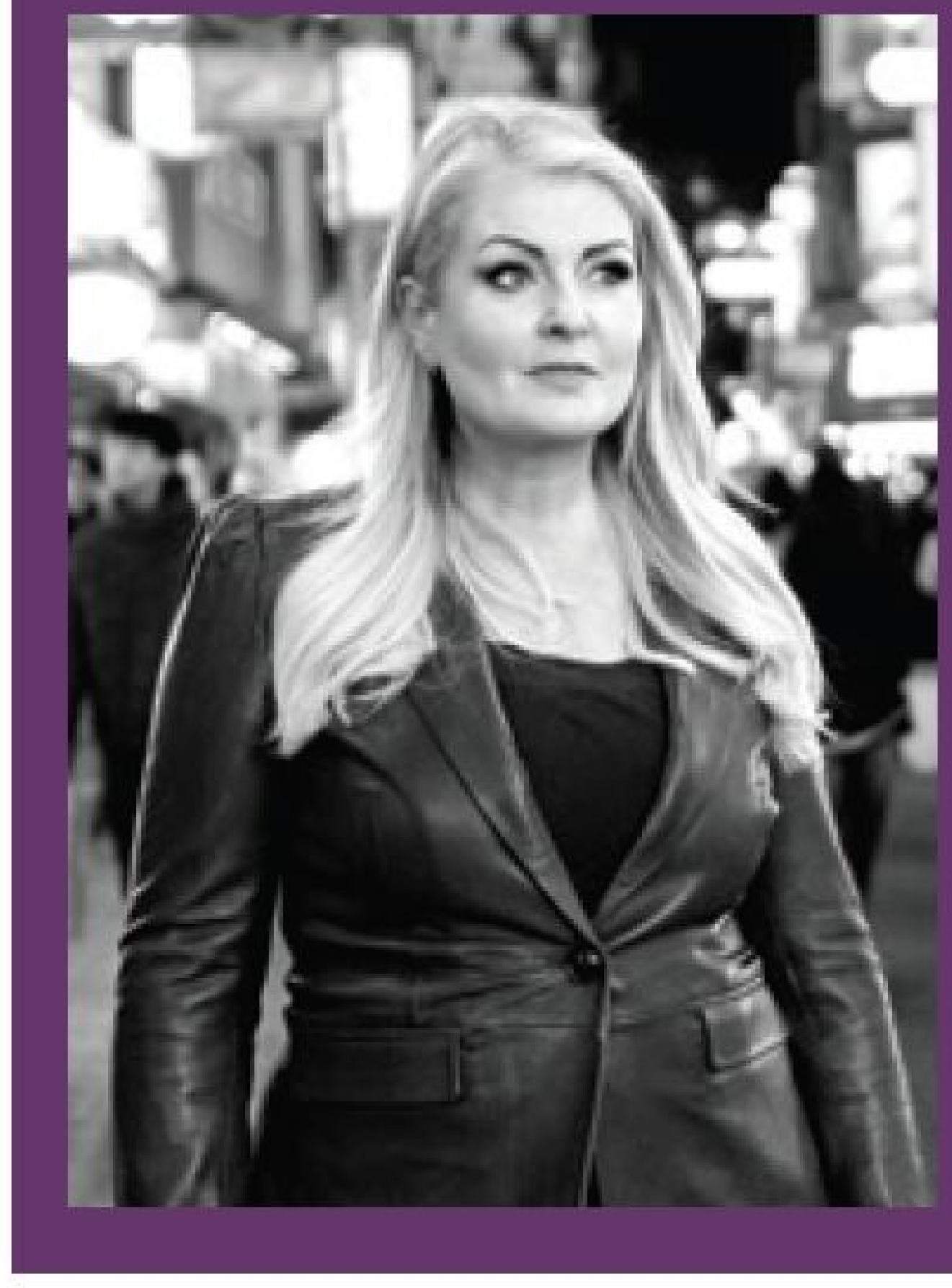
What about in business branding?

Focusing too much on the product and not enough on the people. For me, it is about service not sales. Businesses that lead with their purpose create a deeper, more lasting connection.

What would you never travel without?

A picture of my family and cards from them packed in my carry-on, and my sleeping kit, including a wraparound sleep mask (Drowsy), comfy nightwear (Olivia Von Halle), and noise cancelling headphones with a smidge of melatonin. I also had a session with trainer and nutritionist Rafat Shawe recently, who organised some travel equipment for stretches and gentle exercise that I can do in the hotel room.

KATE HARDCASTLE MBE
GLOBAL CONSUMER SPECIALIST



Award-winning consumer expert,writer, broadcaster, and speaker Kate has given keynotes all over the world and been on TV, working with leading brands and personalities

IMAGE: SUPPLIED

24 HOURS IN Yerevan

One of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, Armenia's capital has plenty of arts, culture, and music to enrich your mind – as well as a rich and complex history, easily accessible nature, and delicious food and drink

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

MORNING

Start your day at the Cascade Complex. This architectural marvel offers panoramic views of the city, and is open 24/7. A sprawling cultural hub, it has a grand staircase of terraced steps, with gorgeous art installations, fountains, and gardens along the way. From its higher levels, you can see stunning vistas of the city skyline with the iconic Mount Ararat beyond, and if you really want to get stuck into the culture, you can also visit the Cafesjian Center for the Arts, which is housed in and around the complex. The centre has a museum, wherein the exhibits spill out onto the cascade's gardens and adjacent pedestrian zone, but there are also indoor art galleries to peruse. When you're ready for a bit of culinary fuel, there are plenty of cute cafés around the complex in which to have breakfast. There are quite a few along the nine-minute walk that will take you to your next stop, Republic Square. L'ÉTÉ Café & Veranda, T Philosophy, Andrew, Juli's, Malocco, Limone, and Achajour are all recommended picks. You can find a Westernised breakfast at many places, but if you're after some classic Armenian fare, look out for some shakshuka (eggs poached in a tomato-based sauce), or matsun (fermented yoghurt) served with honey and nuts plus cheese on the side, all mopped up with a freshly-baked lavash wrap.

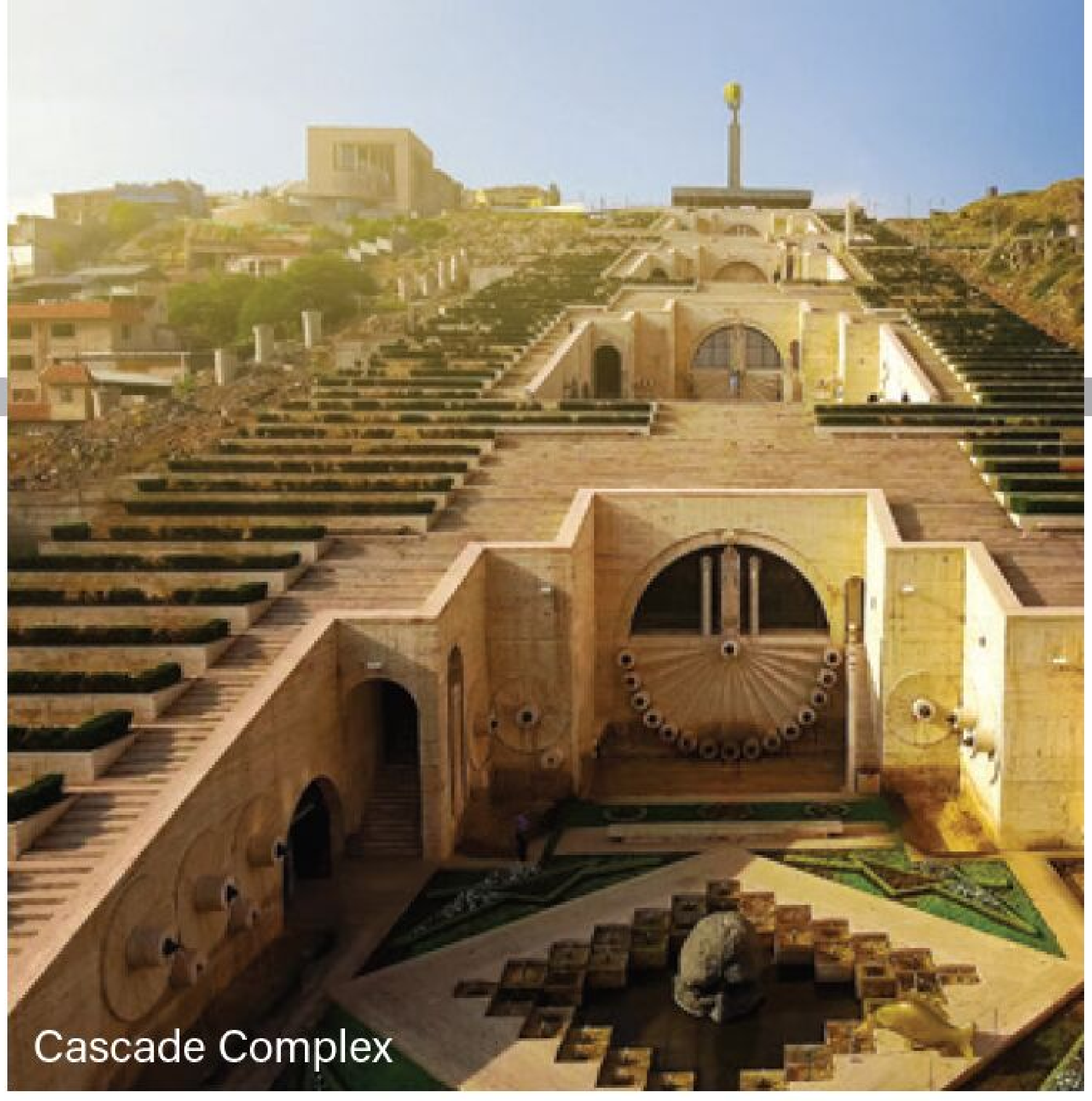
Republic Square

Traditional woodwind instruments

Dancers in traditional clothing

AFTERNOON

After breakfast, head to Republic Square. Originally named after Vladimir Lenin until 1991, it has been enhanced multiple times over the years, with the most significant being a redesign by architect Alexander Tamanyan in 1924, as part of an urban master plan for the city. Marvel at its "singing" musical fountains, and then head to the History Museum to learn more about the country's past. For another culture fix, the National Gallery of Armenia – the largest art museum in Armenia – is also found here. The Armenia Marriott Hotel Yerevan is also well worth a visit. Opened in 1958 as the Armenia Hotel – a state-owned property during the Soviet period – it was privatised in 1998, and reopened as the city's first international chain hotel in the city in 1999. If you're looking to pick up some souvenirs, you'll find everything from traditional duduks (woodwind instruments) and handwoven carpets to intricate jewellery, tea sets, dishware, chess and backgammon sets, and more at the open-air Vernissage Market less than a five-minute walk away. There are numerous restaurants to grab lunch in nearby, where you can try Armenian dishes such as khotovats (grilled meat skewers), basturma (paper-thin air-dried cured beef), ishkhan (Sevan trout), and spas (yoghurt soup). If you're a whiskey fan, the Ararat Brandy Museum has a tour with a guided tour of the museum (including a peek into the historic distillery and its centuries-old traditions), plus a one-hour cognac-tasting masterclass. Another company located nearby, Noy Factory, offers a similar tour.



Cascade Complex

Armenian food

EVENING

The rich music and arts scene of this city carries on into the night, with plenty of aural and visual spectacles to be found. You can dress in your finest attire and take in a performance at the Armenian National Opera and Ballet Theatre, or for something more casual, there's a vibrant live music scene to be found at Malkhas Jazz Club, mezzo Club, Ulikhanyan Club, and the Kami Music Club. Visit Dolmama – a renowned restaurant on Pushkin Street – or Tavern Yerevan on Teryan Street for dinner, then dream and dance the night away. BT

Emirates, flydubai, Air Arabia, and Wizz Air all fly nonstop directly to Yerevan from the UAE

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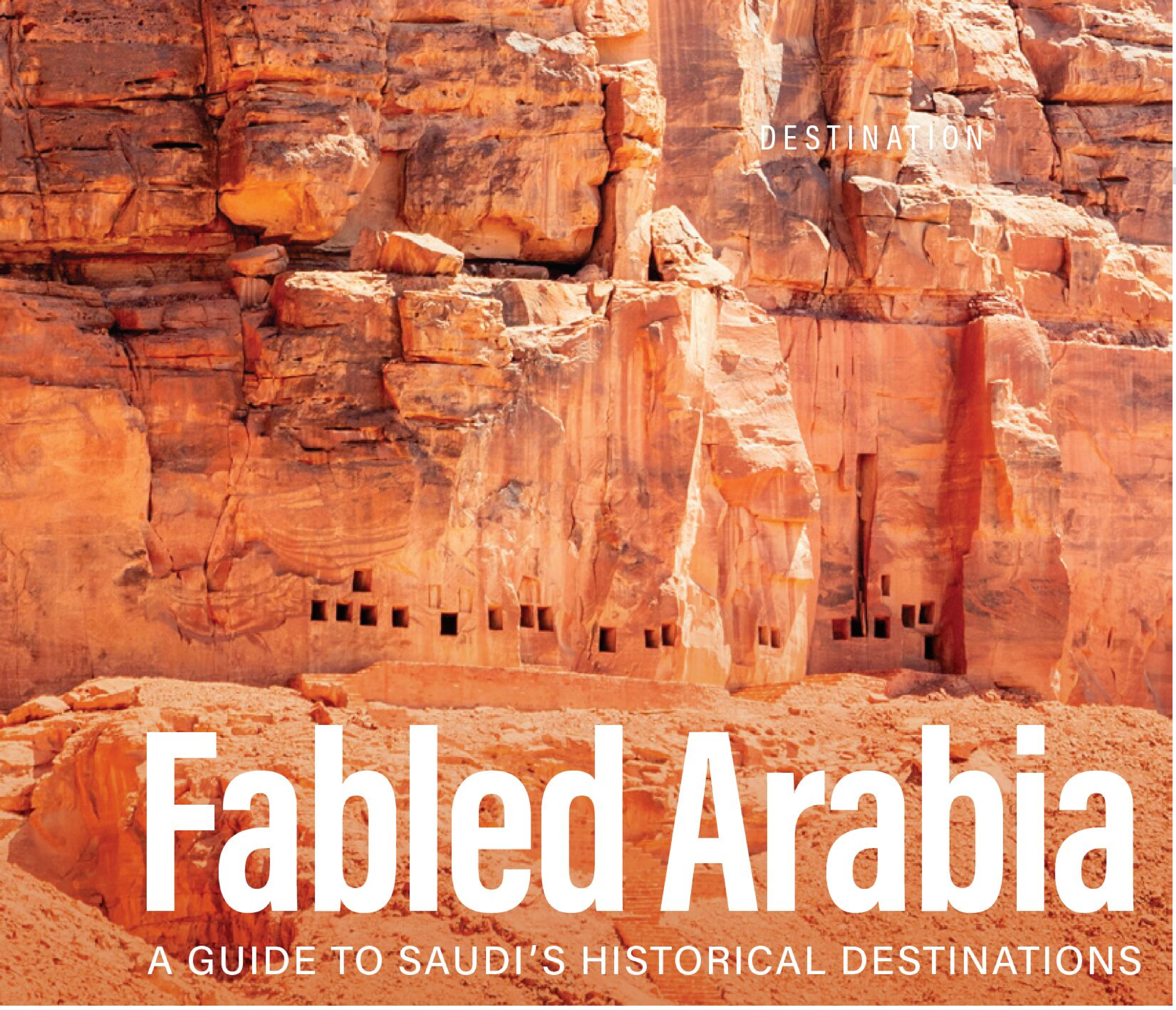

Fabled Arabia

A GUIDE TO SAUDI'S HISTORICAL DESTINATIONS

In the heart of Arabia, Saudi is a land steeped in history, culture, and tradition. From the vibrant super corals of the Red Sea to its lush oases, and the mountains of Aseer and Baha to its undulating dunes, wonder awaits in Saudi. With no fewer than eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites and more than 10,000 archaeological sites, the country is filled with unexpected treasures for visitors of every background.

From the mysterious pull of the Tantora in AlUla to the regenerative powers of the Red Sea, Saudi's sites are fuelled by stories passed down through generations. Want to discover this beautiful country's legendary landmarks but don't know where to stay? Here's a guide to the many enchanting locations behind the myths and stories that have shaped Saudi's beautiful, centuries-old landscapes.

Dadan & Lihyan: The Twin Kingdoms

AlUla's ancient twin kingdoms of Dadan and Lihyan offer a glimpse into the sophisticated ancient cultures of Saudi. Civilizations in AlUla flourished from at least the Iron Age (first millennium BCE) onwards, until, at some point around 2,500 years ago, control over Dadan shifted to the kings of the tribe of Lihyan. Follow in the footsteps of the ancients with a tour of the ancient kingdom of the Lihyanite and Dadanite civilisations, looking at rock faces adorned with scenes of hunting, camels, ostriches, and abstract depictions of people.

ABOVE: Dadan, an ancient kingdom in Saudi's AlUla

TOP RIGHT: Wadi Lajab, Jazan

BELOW: Discover the Tantora in AlUla's Old Town

Tantora: The Annual Cultural Calendar of AlUla

The Tantora is an ancient sundial used by locals of AlUla Old Town for centuries to mark the changing of the seasons. The sun's rays falling on the stone dial marked the first day of winter and the return of agricultural activities. But myths also tell of the Tantora having mystical powers, said to be able to influence the weather and bring prosperity.

To see the Tantora, take a guided tour of AlUla Old Town and let the rhythm of the past flow through you at this remarkable landmark. For an truly authentic stay, the Dar Tantora hotel's mudbrick buildings have been meticulously restored into boutique-style accommodation, offering an ideal place to rest after a day of immersing yourself in history.

Thaj - City of Gold

The village of Thaj, also known as the "City of Gold", is an archaeological treasure trove in the Eastern Province of Saudi. Excavations in one of its 2,000 year old cemeteries in 1998 uncovered the remains the "Thaj Princess", a young girl estimated to be between six and ten years old. Lying on a wooden bed, her head was adorned with three gold bands, and she wore gold necklaces with rubies, turquoise and pearls. The Thaj Princess was found surrounded by four golden statutes, along with more than 200 gold buttons in different sizes.

Saudi archeologists believe this site was the capital of the Kingdom of Gerrha, founded around 690 B.C and thought to be an important trading centre. Lost to time, it is believed that many of the city's treasures have yet to be discovered.

Wadi Lajab

Wadi Lajab is a breathtaking natural wonder nestled amongst the rugged landscape of Jazan. The site is the stuff of legend – this lush oasis was said to be a refuge for Qais, who roamed the desert composing poetry after being separated from his love, Layla. The vibrant greens and blues of Wadi Lajab offer a serene escape, inviting visitors to explore its trails and find their own moments of peace and reflection. →

IMAGES: VADIM.NEFEDOV/ADOBE STOCK; WESTEND61, XAVIERARNAU/GETTY IMAGES

The Red Sea and Super Corals

Saudi's Red Sea is one of the most expansive wonders of Arabia. The 28,000 sq km paradise is home to a vast archipelago of more than 90 islands, stunning beaches, sweeping desert dunes, and natural wonders including one of the world's few thriving reefs, dormant volcanoes, ancient heritage sites, and mountain canyons. Its glass-like waters house the world's fourth-largest reef system, with 175 species of coral reefs, 195 species of fish and vulnerable species such as Hawksbill turtles.

The corals of the Northern Red Sea possess a remarkable trait: they are more heat-tolerant than corals across most of the world. Dubbed 'super corals', they could be the key to understanding and potentially restoring coral reefs globally, which are increasingly under threat. You can explore these colourful corals in Yanbu, Saudi's scuba-diving capital – its Diving Bubbles Centre will not only turn you into a diver, but also offer you opportunities to take amazing underwater photographs, or take part in fishing trips where you can catch your own meal.

Rijal Almaa Heritage Village

To experience a real-life gingerbread village, head to Rijal Almaa, on the list of sites waiting to be approved by UNESCO. This heritage village in Aseer exudes a quaint charm, with about 60 palaces built from natural stone, clay and wood, and with brightly coloured window shutters set against a stunning mountain backdrop. The village was the site of historical battles, famously against the Ottomans, who were defeated into signing Aseer's independence from the Ottomans – the first of its kind in the Arabian Peninsula.

Today, Aseer is known for Al-Qatt Al-Asiri: an ancient art form passed down through generations and carried out by women. Fatima Faye Al-Almaai, an artist specialising in Asiri art engraving, opened the Al-Qatt Al-Aseeri Museum (Fatimah Museum), which trains locals in the artform. The museum features more than 300 pieces of clothing and silver jewellery in addition to Asiri wall sculptures, tableware, "Altakhtat" chairs, paintings, shutters, and boxes.

Mustatils: The Mysterious Rectangles

The AlUla landscape is dotted with mysterious rectangular, low-walled stone structures called Mustatils, the Arabic word for "rectangle". Over 1,600 mustatils can be found scattered in the desert south of AlUla, which is a short 1.5-hour flight from Riyadh.

They remain one of Saudi's most intriguing archaeological discoveries, with their purpose and origin debated. Recent studies show that these structures pre-date Egypt's pyramids, with their purpose the topic of continued debate. Regardless of their purpose, they reveal the ingenuity of ancient builders – some mustatils are architecturally complex, containing pillars, standing stones and smaller 'cells' of rock walls.

ABOVE: Rijal Almaa Heritage Village

BOTTOM LEFT: The Red Sea and its vibrant super corals

To explore these mustatils, it is advised to hire a local guide.

With visa initiatives being continuously developed, and the country's eVisa programme now including 66 countries and special administrative regions, a GCC residents visa, and a free 96-hour Stopover Visa, it has never been easier to visit Saudi. Citizens of the UK, US, or Schengen visa holders, as well as residents of the UK, US, or European Union countries, are eligible for the instant eVisa.

To learn more and plan your trip, head to visitsaudi.com

A MODERN GATEWAY

Saudi Arabia's touristic appeal is growing for both international as well as regional visitors. Those travelling from Dubai, one of the Middle East's busiest hubs, can start their trip at flydubai's new business class lounge at Dubai International Airport's Terminal 2, which is open to business class passengers as well as Platinum and Gold-level Emirates Skywards members. The airline is connected to a growing list of destinations in Saudi, including Abha, Neom, AlUla, the Red Sea, Jeddah, Riyadh, Madinah, Makkah, Jouf, Ha'il, Gassim, Yanbu, Tabuk, Taif, Qaisumah, Nejran, Hofuf, and more.

IMAGES: SAUDI TOURISM AUTHORITY; DIDIER MARTI/GETTY IMAGES

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Athens cradles a new civilization

A decade ago, Greece was bankrupt. Today, it is building the US$8 billion smart city of tomorrow

A fleet of cranes and diggers toil away on a vast 6.2 million sqm construction site along the Athens Riviera, 20 minutes south of Athens. It's the former home of Ellinikon International Airport, which closed in 2001 when Athens International Airport opened. Several structures from the old airport remain, including hangars, terminals and signage, but soon the area will be unrecognisable, transformed into The Ellinikon – the largest smart city in Europe.

The US$8 billion project, led by LAMDA Development, is the kind of thing you might expect to see in the Middle East or China – not the sleepy coast of one of Europe's ancient capitals. But the futuristic city will be a major boost for Athenians and visitors alike, and a gleaming testament to modern Greece. The first phase of The Ellinikon is due to open in 2026, with the project due for final completion in 2037.

At three times the size of Monaco, the new 'city within a city' will encompass everything from luxury accommodation and superyacht marinas to schools, shopping centres, and an enormous green space bigger than Hyde Park, with a 50km path network for pedestrians and cyclists.

Driving around the dusty site by car – it's far too large to wander in a hard hat – gives you a sense of the scale. The first floors of the 50-storey Riviera Tower (Greece's first skyscraper) are already visible, along with the foundations of a new state-of-the-art sports centre.

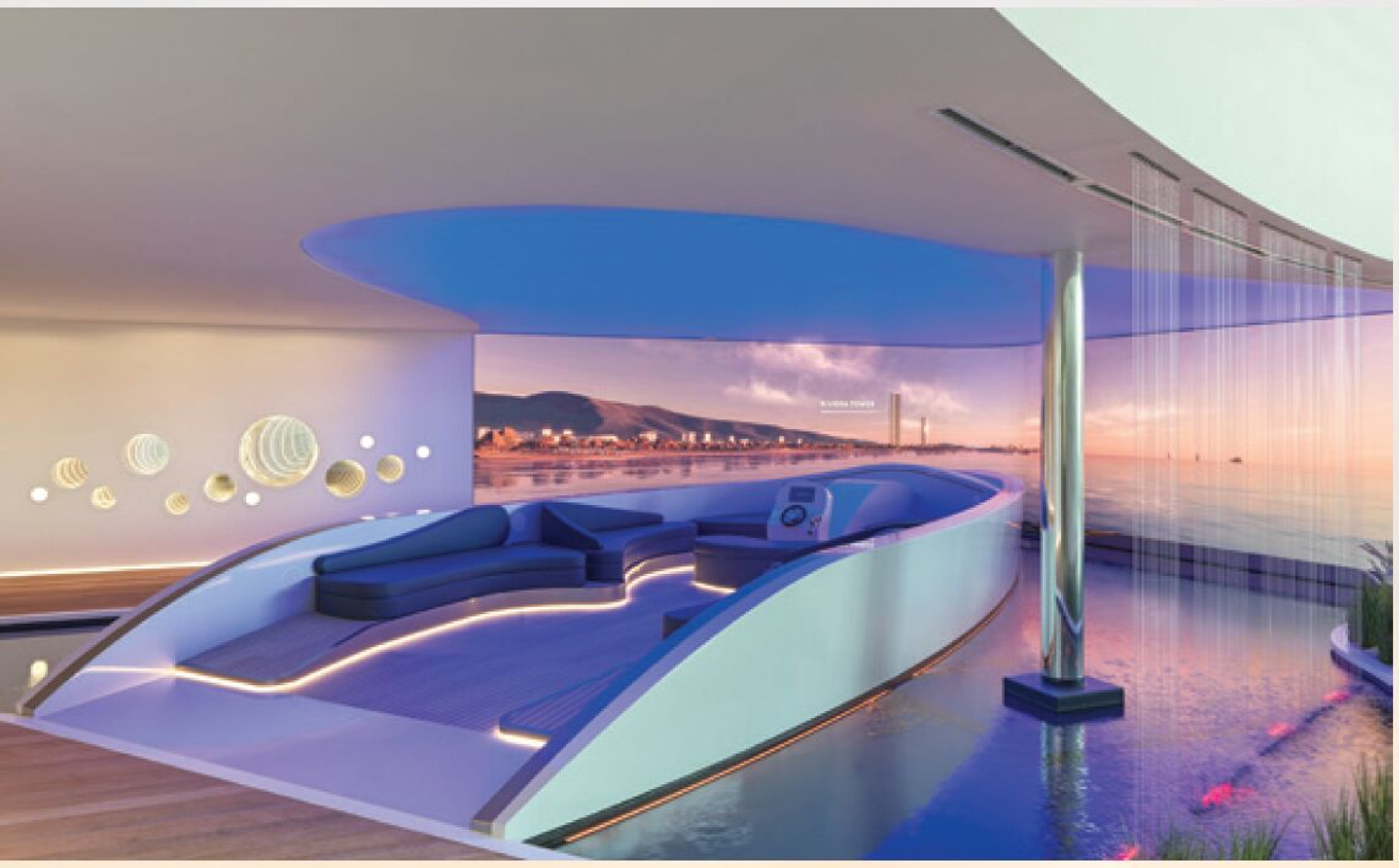
Further along the coast, a cluster of luxury waterfront villas are starting to

→

IMAGES: THE ELLINIKON/LAMDA DEVELOPMENT; DIMITRIS SPYROU - PENTAPRISM

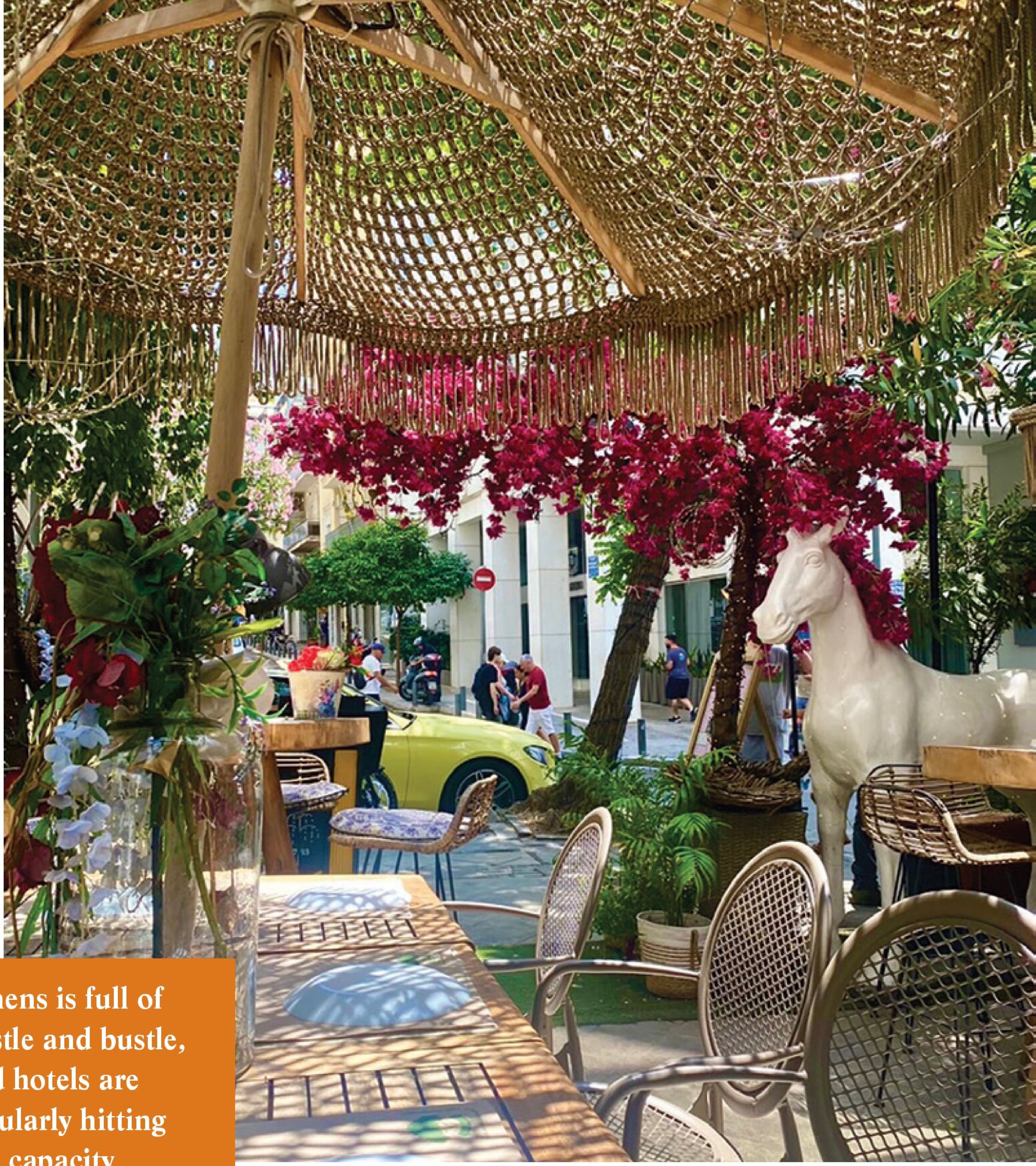
MAIN IMAGE: Computer rendering of the completed Riviera Galleria

INSET, FROM TOP: CGI of the Ellinikon coastline; The Experience Centre



> The futuristic city will be a major boost for Athenians and visitors alike

WORDS TAMSIN COCKS



take shape. The 350 seafront villas in the Cove Residences have already sold out, but a further 1,115 residential units under construction in Little Athens offer exciting real estate opportunities.

Inside the Ellinikon Experience Centre, housed within a repurposed aircraft hangar, the future city is brought to life even more clearly. Interactive displays help to showcase the destination, complete with a virtual reality speedboat ride (which takes place as the sun sets over the Aegean Sea), while also passing on valuable lessons for modern sustainable living.

The project aims to incorporate the highest sustainability credentials and cutting-edge smart technology. All buildings will be designed to prioritise natural ventilation and lighting, while being covered in vegetation to help with natural cooling, as well as solar panels to make the most of Athens' year-round supply of sunshine. Cutting-edge water, waste management, and smart energy systems will also be employed to improve sustainability.

IMAGE: DESPINA GALANI/UNSPLASH

THIS PAGE FROM LEFT: Pretty streets in Plaka; In Town café

RIGHT: The Acropolis looming over the city

> Athens is full of hustle and bustle, and hotels are regularly hitting full capacity

Meanwhile, modern technology such as the Internet of Things, AI analytics, fibre optic networks, and high-speed 5G public wifi is being embedded into the foundation of the destination. This will mean smart mobility, such as sharing schemes for bikes, e-bikes and scooters, while park benches will feature built-in charging panels for devices.

The Ellinikon is also poised to attract plenty of business travel, with event spaces, a business centre, and plenty of accommodation. Three luxury hotels are set to open, including the Mandarin Oriental (scheduled for 2027) and a Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, the luxury Riviera Galleria retail outlet, and numerous dining outlets.

BOUNCING BACK

A decade ago, it seemed unlikely that the project would ever get off the ground, with Greece's economy in tatters after the 2008 financial crisis. Internal structural weakness saw inflation rise, GDP fall, and Greece become the first European country to default on its IMF loan payments.

Since then, however, the country has turned a corner. In August 2023, German credit rating agency Scope gave Greece a BBB- rating, indicating the country was on its way back to health, a trend among similar reports from rating agencies such as R&I, DBRS, S&P, and Fitch.

Tourism, one of the country's primary sources of income, has also rebounded. The country welcomed 32 million foreign travellers in 2023, marking a six per cent rise on 2019 levels and making it the tenth most visited country in the world, according to the World Tourism Organisation.

You don't really need statistics to tell you that. Athens is full of hustle and bustle, and hotels are regularly hitting full capacity. A local tells me that even the Greeks are thinking about going abroad for their summer holidays, with resorts on islands like Rhodes and Santorini already booked up by international visitors.

My hotel, the Electra Palace, is right in the heart of the action – a grand neoclassical building, hemmed in tightly by one-way roads. The rooms are elegant and spacious, and there's a lovely outdoor pool (though it's quite small so avoid peak hours). The wow factor lies on its top floor: a large airy restaurant with a wraparound balcony offering spectacular views over the Acropolis.

The surrounding Plaka neighbourhood is the oldest part of town, stuffed with historical treats and a thriving mix of entertainment, culture, tourism, and leisure. The sprawling labyrinthine alleys offer new delights at every turn: down one street, an endless parade of bars, restaurants and eateries; down another, the eye-catching Orlik Gallery with fantastical contemporary works from Georgian artist Inna Orlik. It's a cosmopolitan area, though there are tourist traps and gimmicks (I'm advised to "avoid anything with 'Zorba' in the title").

I dove into a cute bohemian café called In Town, admiring the eclectic mix of cascading pink flowers, white horse statues, and vintage rattan umbrellas. I kept it simple for lunch with chicken shish and a Greek salad – the fresh ingredients were bursting with flavour.

Of course, no trip to Athens would be complete without a visit to the Acropolis. It can be seen from just about the whole city, but the entrance is at the foot of the slopes, next to the Acropolis Museum. You must purchase tickets from the entrance gate (or online in advance) for a specific slot, and tour guides are floating around for private hire.

It's quite something to climb the path to the Parthenon and marvel at its ancient glory, even when it's wrapped in unsightly scaffolding. From this vantage spot, you can also comb your eyes over every inch of the sprawling Greek capital.

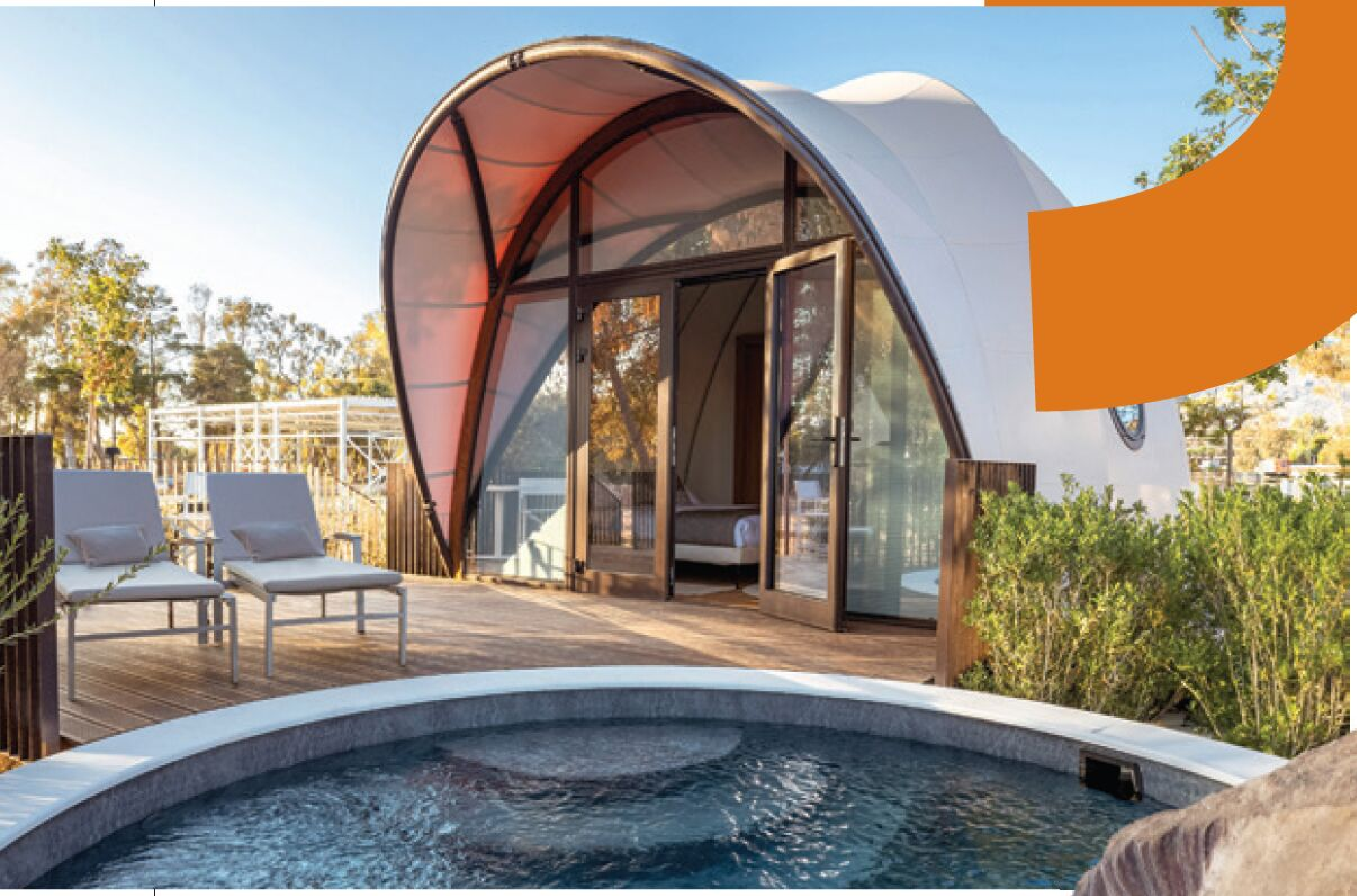
The museum, on the other hand, is packed with the fantastic sculptures that would have once decorated the citadel, many worryingly decapitated, with panels of text explaining the ancient way of life. One video exhibit showcased the mesmerising process of lasering off eons-worth of grime from the statues in a similar way to tattoo removal. There's also an al fresco café on the second floor, with views over the historic site, and a gift shop with a great range for kids.

NEW OPENINGS

In further testament to Greece's rebounding fortunes, there's been a spate of exciting new openings in and around the capital.

In October 2023, One&Only Aesthesis opened on the Athenian Riviera's Glyfada seafront, a protected beach and forest reserve. Offering the peace and seclusion of an island-style retreat, the resort offers 95 stylish bungalows, 18 residences and two villas, each with a private pool, sunny garden and atmospheric outdoor showers. Dining concepts range from fresh all-day Mediterranean fare at Ora to signature olive

IMAGE: GEORGE CLERK/GETTY IMAGES



Guests can lay their eyes on original art works by Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau

cocktails at Alelia bar. There's also an indulgent spa, fitness hub, and the adults-only Beach Club with stylish cabanas and live music.

Meanwhile, in the heart of Athens, luxury boutique property The Dolli opened last year. Housed in a 1920s neoclassical mansion, the property has 46 beautiful rooms and apartments, along with a rooftop restaurant and infinity pool with panoramic city views.

Inside the property, guests can lay their eyes on original art works by Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau, alongside 18th-century antiques, custom-made furniture from contemporary designers such as Pierre Augustin Rose, and a collection of ancient Greek ceramics.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Acropolis views from The Dolli; One&Only Aesthesis; Inventive dishes at Makris; Acropolis Museum art; 91 Athens Riviera

Greek hospitality brand Domes has introduced two offerings that upgrade the city's luxury lifestyle credentials.

Taking glamping to the next level is 91 Athens Riviera, The Resort – a luxury cabana experience for guests and private members that opened in June 2024. There are 28 spacious "luxents" (luxury tents) at 43 sqm, most with their own private plunge pool and furnished like a Domes hotel, including all the mod cons – from a 50-inch TV and Marshall speaker to a super-king bed and well-stocked minibar. Plus, the added benefits of a garden or lagoon views for the calming influence of nature. On-site activities include tennis courts, sunrise yoga, personalised coaching, a swimming pool, fitness centre, and the signature

IMAGES: NIKOS DANILIDIS; RUPERT PEACE

Domes Soma Spa, as well as upmarket restaurant and bars.

For dinner, however, it's another Domes offering that needs to be top of your list. Makris, located in the heart of Plaka with views of the Acropolis, offers a new fine-dining experience that is bound to get Michelin attention soon.

The exquisite Utopia menu (€140 per person; other tasting menus from €80) from chef Peter Dimas is a masterclass in art, creativity and cooking. With the restaurant boasting its own organic farm, sustainability plays a central role in its ethos and is also a visible part of the meal, with brightly coloured flower petals throughout our dishes.

I can't emphasise the playfulness and creativity of each course: a stupendous mushroom "cappuccino"; a squid ink-latticed fish skeleton; a literal bouquet of flowers; chocolate chess pieces… the two-hour experience flew by in a whirl of delicious delight. Add expert service, from synchronised plate clearing to detailed descriptions of the olive oil and water menus (yes, menus for both), and it was a singularly impressive experience.

With the Acropolis looming dreamily in the background and my senses tingling from the innovative menu, it became clear that Greece is reinventing itself for the modern age. From vast forward-thinking smart cities to molecular gastronomy, Athens is firmly stepping into the future. BT

BEYOND ATHENS

EXARCHEIA

Exarcheia is a local neighbourhood north of the centre that has an edgy, alternative vibe. Political slogans and graffiti pepper the streets, which are filled with independent cafés, vinyl stores, vape shops, and bars hosting *rembetika* (Greek blues) and punk bands. Here you'll find earnest revolutionaries browsing the anarchist books stores and creatives opening up art galleries. Down another of the grid-like lanes, there's an open-air food market sprawled across multiple roads, filled with bright lemons, sweet cherries, and an impossible array of olives.

PIRAEUS

Thirty minutes south of Athens lies Piraeus, a major shipping hub, cruise terminal and site of a superyacht marina. The district is likely to be visited by those hopping to one of Greece's many island paradises, but it's also increasingly popular for business events.

Opened in 2019, The Alex is a bright new business hotel from The Santikos Collection, with a gorgeous rooftop restaurant and event space, along with smart, minimalist rooms. More recently, the group opened Twinn in the heart of Piraeus to cater to the rise of business delegates, which offers clean, basic three-star accommodation with easy connection to the metro.

While Piraeus is traditionally a stopping-off point, the area is worth exploring if you're passing through – from the smattering of art galleries to the fascinating archaeological museum and numerous waterfront eateries, including glamorous pool bar Pisina overlooking the marina, or loud and buzzy Cartel.

BOARDING PASS
PASSPORT

The global travel industry is increasingly catering to female travellers – and more women than ever are on the move

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

Wander Women

When you picture a frequent flyer, who do you picture? If your vision was of a woman, then you've imagined what is currently the statistic majority. A recent study commissioned by Condor Ferries found that 64 per cent of travellers worldwide are female, while only 36 per cent are male. A lot of these travellers are going it alone, as well: A recent study by travel advisory Virtuoso and leading travel trend forecasting agency Globetrender found that 71 per cent of their solo travel clients are women. Another report by Road Scholar revealed that 81 per cent of their solo travellers were women, while a report by tourism market research firm Future Partners found that nearly 40 per cent of female travellers surveyed would like to take a solo trip this year.

It's a pretty big statement, when you consider that solo travel itself is on the rise – as reported in the February 2025 issue of *Business Traveller Middle East*, the number of people travelling alone (for leisure too, not just business) has been steadily rising since 2017, with many more people having stated that they'd like to do so this year.

Technology-supported safety, and financial independence

One key factor behind this growing desire – dubbed the "Wander Women" trend – is the fact that technology has made it considerably safer for people from all over the world to explore new destinations than ever before. It has enabled the ease of communication and improved infrastructure, offering more choices than ever for finding locations, reading reviews, staying in touch with loved ones, or being able to book private transport or reputed guides. Keeping a digital trail may possibly deter predators seeking lone women that they believe nobody is keeping track of, while technological advancements have armed female travellers with new ways to navigate their safety – traditionally one of the toughest challenges of travelling alone or only with other women. With this increased confidence and empowerment, the courage to step out beyond one's comfort zone has become easier to find.

Meanwhile, a study by Fidelity reported that 53 per cent of women now feel that they are financially independent – the highest this figure has been than at any other point within the last few years. With this increased capacity to spend comes a rise in the number of female travellers. Whether they're single or attached, women have been reported to drive 70-80 per cent of all consumer purchasing decisions – and with women typically also being those who plan the itinerary in a family trip, it's little surprise that when their ability to travel more increases, more of them are keen to take it.

Modern mindsets, freedom, and flexibility

One of the greatest draws for solo travel, in general, is the freedom and flexibility it can offer – and this is a particular draw for female travellers. As the scope for personalised luxury travel offerings continues to grow, the idea of being able to travel somewhere to pamper yourself or head off on an adventure – or fulfil your own desires without the responsibilities that may otherwise claim your time and attention at home – can make for pretty irresistible appeal.

Changing societal attitudes across the globe are also playing a part: the perception of women travelling alone is changing. It is now more socially acceptable than it was in the past for women to travel solo or head abroad with friends on a girls trip, even in countries where this once wasn't the case – and even if it means temporarily leaving spouses or families behind.

Many countries experienced a peak in online searches for topics related to divorce in 2020 – followed by a crude rise in divorce rates across the world in recent years, along with a decline in marriage rates. This phenomenon has coincided with increasing professional, social, and legal opportunities for women to make it on their own. As a result, the amount of women ready to spend their time and money on ticking off their bucket list destinations has also risen. Even among couples and groups of friends, the pandemic's global lockdowns and other strife caused many people across the world to come out of it ready to embrace a more "YOLO" – "You Only Live Once" – mindset, determined to finally visit the places they'd always dreamed of, and maybe put off. Another side-effect of the pandemic's isolation was how much more comfortable and confident more people felt about spending time in solitude – and this, combined with redefined attitudes around what constitutes value, personal growth, and the way they approach their finances and personal choices, have all fed into jumpstarting the existing spark for more solo and female travel alike.

TOP: The popularity of major ride-hailing apps like Uber and Lyft have made travel easier and safer for women who explore alone

> Technology has armed female travellers with new ways to navigate safety

Catering to the wander women

Noting the potential of this newly-expanded customer base, the hospitality and tourism industries have been quick to respond. In Dubai, pioneering female-focused travel consultancy The World At Her Feet had already launched in 2012, with an all-female team curating trips to hand-picked destinations, with itineraries designed with their unique customer base in mind, and placing safety and comfort at the top of their priority list.

Fellow Dubai-based travel company Dubai Musts is described as a travel agency for women – its website even proclaims "No boys allowed!" The company offers ladies-only tours, allowing women – whether coming alone or with friends – the chance to meet and befriend other like-minded travellers through memorable adventures. Another UAE-based company, AFC Holidays, offers women's special tour packages "tailored for the modern, on-the-go, super women in search of a retreat." Its website proclaims that it creates journeys for women who crave adventure, culture, and unforgettable experiences, announcing that it is: "Calling all beautiful women

→

IMAGES: BIRUOH, YAROSLAV ASTAKHOV/ADOBE STOCK

out there... Find your tribe or strengthen existing bonds". It cites its safety-first philosophy, the exclusivity of its experiences, and its supportive community – along with the chance to make friends with other like-minded women – as reasons to opt in.

> **It cites the chance to make friends with other like-minded women as a reason to opt in**

Travel company Calm Palm Escapes was founded with the same sentiment. Created by Dubai-based entrepreneur Zoya Gregory-Pasha, its first-ever luxury nature and wellness retreat, to Sri Lanka's South Coast, was tailored exclusively for women. "As a woman who has travelled on her own many times, including to Sri Lanka, I wanted to make this type of travel more accessible to other women. I want [them] to be able to come on their own and enjoy truly magical experiences whilst feeling secure and comfortable, so that they can relax and totally unwind," Gregory-Pasha says. The trip's wellness aspect is an integral part of the offering, again as a niche that she believes would be particularly attractive for female clients. "Women travellers have so many considerations to think about when booking a solo trip or a trip with friends. Safety, comfort, and security are all top of mind. I think wellness has become a buzzword, but in today's society, it really is so important to take time out to recharge and disconnect. We all live such busy lives that we often don't remember to prioritise our wellbeing, so our Sri Lanka escape was designed as an antidote to the stresses faced by the modern woman," Gregory-Pasha says.

In India, women-centric travel company Wovoyage – founded as a start-up in 2016 – aims to facilitate women's travel in India. The company does cater to both men and women, but it offers additional features for specific types of travellers that might have once felt afraid to travel alone – or in pairs or small groups, including women, couples, or senior citizens. In doing so, they're helping to change the perception of travel in the country through this safety net. Another India-based travel company, Wander Womaniya, centers around solo trips for women across India and the globe.

Tourism boards, too, have picked up on an opportunity among this subset. Saudi Arabia's official Visit Saudi website proudly proclaims its first-place rank among the G20 countries in the list of the safest countries in the world, with an entire page dedicated to the topic of women travelling to Saudi Arabia. In Russia, the Moscow Tourism Board also cites its safety factor as a unique draw for female travellers. In a recent press conference held in the UAE around tourists visiting from the GCC, Evgeny

IMAGES: EPIC_IMAGES, SOUTHTOWNBOY STUDIO/ADOBE STOCK

LEFT: Parts of Thailand with historical and wellness-focused experiences, such as Ayutthaya Province and Chiang Mai, are popular with female and solo travellers

OPPOSITE PAGE: Abu Dhabi in the UAE is known as a safe and welcoming place for female tourists

Kozlov, First Deputy Head of the Office of the Mayor and the Government of Moscow, Chairman of the Moscow City Tourism Committee, highlighted the city's low crime rate. "The safety [factor] has been one of the crucial and critical points of transforming the city according to the Mayor's vision," Kozlov said. "If you leave your mobile phone on a table in a restaurant and go to the toilet, for example, when you come back, it will still be laying there on the table. It's just an example, but even in major tourist attractions, it's safe, because people don't want to steal. They understand the punishment will come 100 per cent. But that's not the main point. Muscovites are ambassadors for tourists – all of us will help you, or any other people, if [anyone is] in trouble and needs assistance."

Other countries that have gained a positive reputation for their appeal for female travellers – whether solo or in small groups – include Vienna, Austria; Taipei, Taiwan; Stockholm, Sweden; Lisbon, Portugal; Reykjavik, Iceland; Dublin, Ireland; Chiang Mai, Thailand; and Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the UAE. Switzerland, Canada, Iceland, Slovenia, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Australia, and New Zealand are also known as strong choices for female travellers. All of these destinations share similar qualities of high safety, typically encompassing low crime rates, well-lit streets, ease of transport, and a protective attitude towards women including a low tolerance for gender-based violence or harassment, a healthy attitude towards gender equality and the global gender gap, and facilities that women in particular can enjoy, whether alone or with friends. Japan is another destination that shines in this regard, with its women-only passenger cars in its subway trains dating back to the 1900s, and its culture not placing stigma on solo experiences, from dining to single-person accommodations and experiences.

Regardless of where you travel, as a woman or man, utilising street smarts is always wise when travelling to a foreign country, especially if you're going it alone. But armed with a bit of solid planning and common sense – such as doing your homework by learning the safe and unsafe parts of a destination, planning a good itinerary, ensuring you have ways to stay connected, making an emergency plan just in case, and keeping friends and family at home informed of your movements – for the woman who is seeking travel-based adventure, more and more of the world is becoming her oyster.

SMART BUYS

Technological advances have led to a spate of new apps and products that make solo travelling easier and safer for women and men alike. Here are a few great picks.

Maps.me. Google Maps is a fantastic tool, used by many people across the world on a daily basis – and while you can download offline Google maps for specific areas, Maps.me is a truly offline alternative that you can download before you leave data or wifi access. It also allows users to save favourite destinations and specific pinpoints, and points you in the way of where you need to go.

TripIt. Travelling independently, but wish you could still have a consolidated itinerary, with all of the information you might need easily at hand? This mobile travel app allows you to keep all of the different aspects of your trip in one handy place, by aggregating all elements of your plans into daily itineraries – all you have to do is forward your travel confirmation emails and it'll create it for you.

She's Birdie Personal Alarm. When it comes to physical safety, portable door locks and door stop alarms can be a wise choice for women (or any) traveller that might be staying in a place that requires reinforcement for more peace of mind. While you're unlikely to need tools like that in a high-safety luxury hotel, the She's Birdie Personal Alarm is a personal safety device that can be useful anywhere, described as "having a fire alarm in your pocket". If you're in danger, all you need to do is pull the pin, and the device will flash and emit a siren-like noise to get the attention of everyone around you. You can turn off the alarm easily if need be, but it can go on for 40 minutes at a time if required. The batteries are easily replaceable, and the device also connects to an app with additional safety features, like live support and location tracking. It's small, and can be attached to a keychain.

ADVENTURES IN ALBANIA

From paranoid dictatorship to dream travel destination, why the Balkan nation is ready for its moment in the sun

WORDS LAURA MILLAR

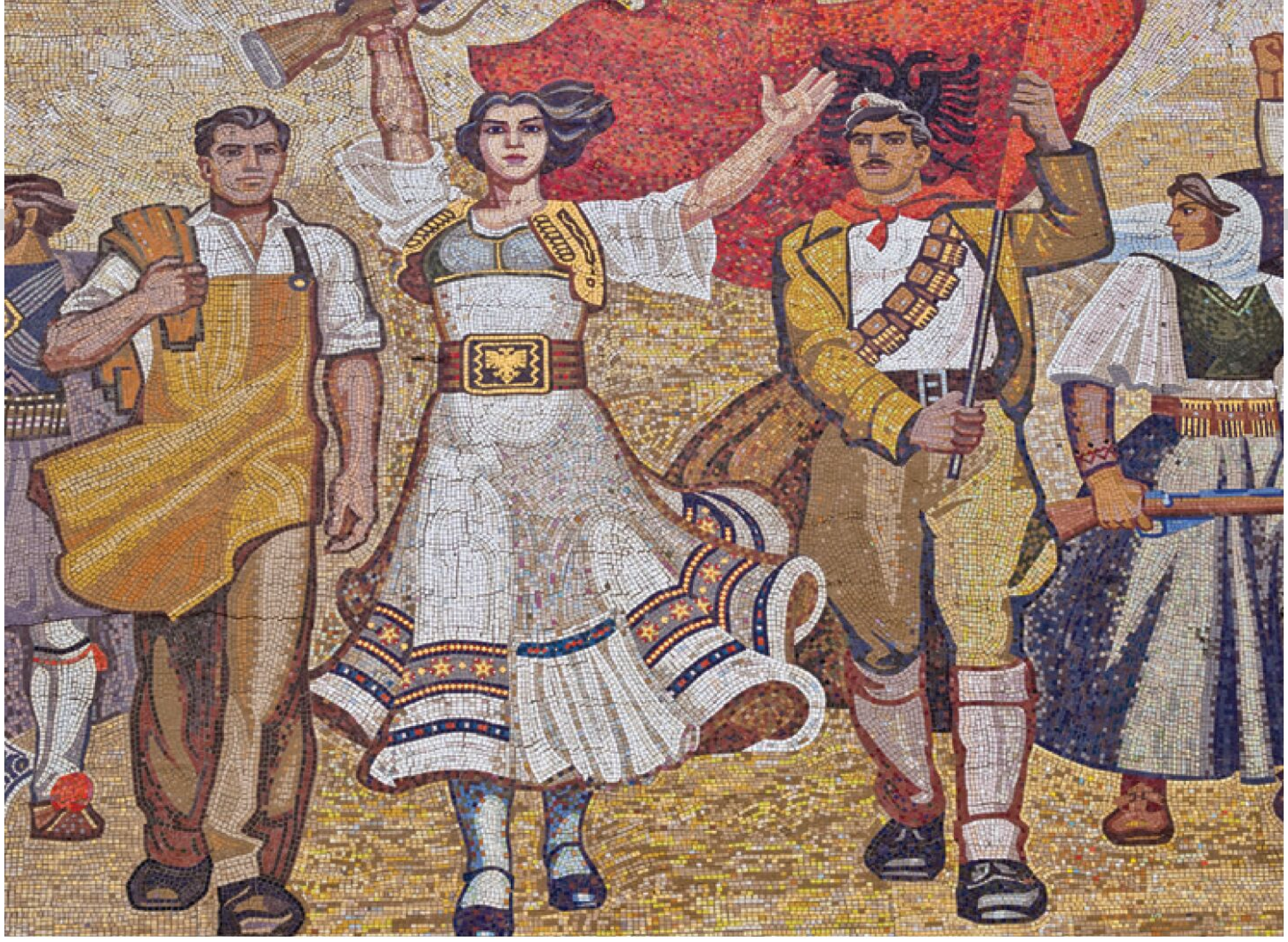
You might have noticed headlines cropping up during the past couple of years, hailing "the Maldives of Europe". Or, if you're on social media, influencers going crazy for a scenic stretch of beach in a tiny seaside town called Ksamil. This coveted new hotspot can be found in the somewhat unlikely destination of… Albania.

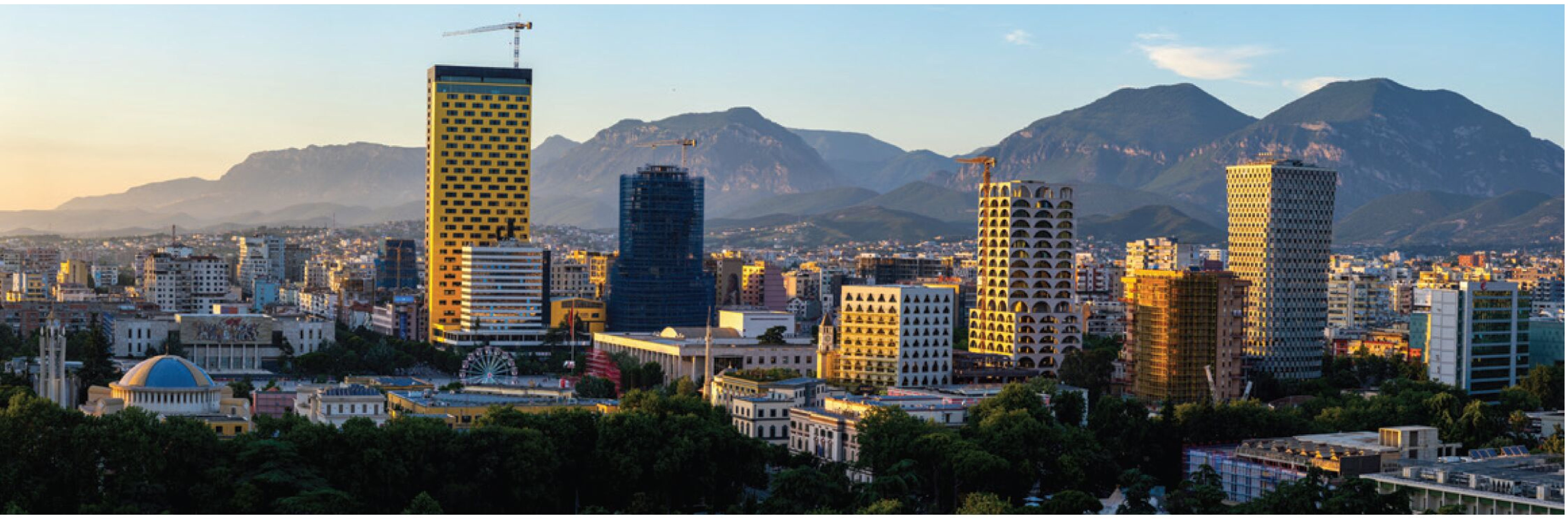
Unlikely, because up until 1990, this staggeringly beautiful Balkan country, bordered by Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Greece was, to all intents and purposes, closed off to the rest of the world. Ruled for 40 years by dictator Enver Hoxha, it laboured under a Stalinist regime which foisted extreme poverty on its people; by the time of his death in 1985, the country was the poorest in Europe, and the third poorest globally, with a GDP per capita of US$640 and an average monthly income of around 5,000 lek (£41).

What a difference a few decades makes. Since emerging from the heavy mantle of communism, Albania has started to flourish under its new, free-market economy, and the leisure and business sectors are sitting up and taking notice.

Reasons to visit are manifold: firstly, the sparkling Adriatic and Ionian coastline, known as the Albanian Riviera, which stretches down from the bustling city of Vlorë, through smaller, prettier towns such as Dhërmi (popular with dance music fans thanks to annual beachside festivals such as Kala and Ion), Himarë, Sarandë and, of course, Ksamil. It also offers mountainous landscapes, a plethora of hiking trails, fascinating UNESCO heritage sites, a delicious culinary scene and – currently, as it's still waiting to have its request to join

> **Since emerging from communism, it has started to flourish under its new, free-market economy**





CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE: Idyllic turquoise waters in Ksamil, a village in the Albanian Riviera; A mosaic above the entrance to the National History Museum in Tirana; The capital's cityscape at sunset

the European Union fully approved – fantastic value for money. A pint of beer or glass of wine will set you back around £2, a cocktail around £6, with a restaurant meal nearing £12. What's not to love?

RICH OFFERINGS

Over the past few years, tourism has shot up stratospherically; recent figures from the European Travel Commission show it's grown 86 per cent since 2019. Its GDP per capita has also been increasing, and last year stood at US$8,800, while the average monthly salary is now around 84,000 lek (£704). Foreign direct investment is also on the rise, with countries including Switzerland, Italy, and the Netherlands targeting sectors such as energy, mining, information, and real estate to a value of around US$1.5 billion in 2022, according to UNCTAD's World Investment Report. Not bad for a country which used to depend on foreign food aid.

Today, Albania's main economic hub – and its most industrialised and fastest growing area – is its handsome, cosmopolitan capital, Tirana. As a result, it has plenty of hotels, conference and event spaces that service the MICE industry – from the Tirana International Hotel & Conference Centre on central Skanderbeg Square, to the Palace of Congresses, a 60s-era, Soviet Modernist-style building a short drive away. The full gamut of international hotel brands can also be found here, including Radisson, Hilton, Marriott, Meliá, and the more recently opened Mercure, with more in the works.

Due to open in 2025 is a brand new InterContinental, currently being constructed on one corner of Skanderbeg Square. It will house around 300 rooms and suites, a luxury spa, casino, several dining outlets including a rooftop restaurant and bar, and a large conference centre with capacity for up to 1,000 people.

Expo Albania, a convention centre with hotel rooms and a wine museum, was also newly commissioned last year. Designed by US firm Stephen Holl Architects, in conjunction with Polish artist Agnieszka Kurant, renderings show striking wavy architecture, with plans for high ecological standards ranging from recycled rainwater pools to solar shingles (photovoltaic roof tiles).

A third international airport is also underway at Vlorë, on the southwest coast, joining the

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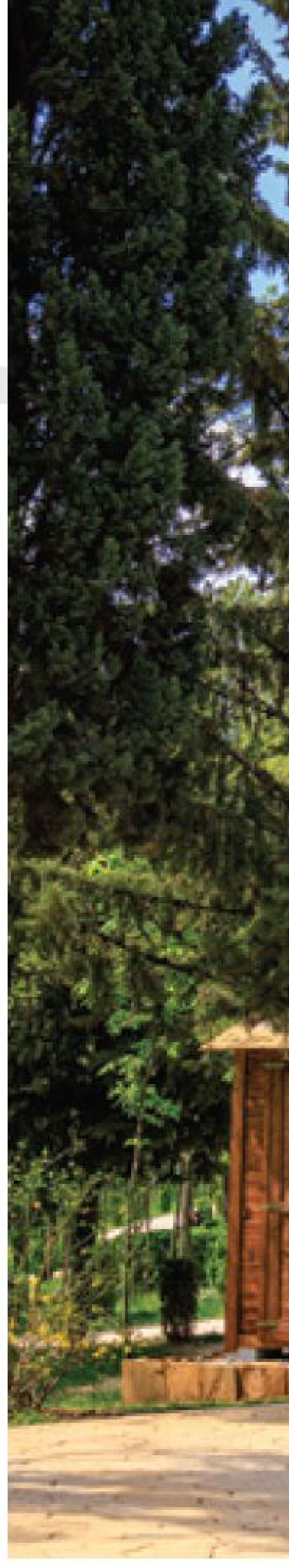


main hub in Tirana and Kukës International Airport in the north. The new airport is scheduled for completion in 2025, and is projected to cost around US$116 million. Vlorës seafront is also being transformed with the Vlorë Marina, a mixed-use development project that will include a new five-star hotel and stylish, sea-view apartments, with moorings for over 400 yachts and super-yachts.

IMMERSE IN CULTURE

All this being said, Albania is still some way off from being a high-end, luxury destination; its lack of high-quality infrastructure positions it roughly where the likes of Croatia and Montenegro were 15 to 20 years ago. But that's also part of its undeniable, unhurried charm. Even the most discerning traveller will find much to get excited about, especially in Tirana, which, with a population of around 528,000, is walkable and relatively easy to navigate.

Skanderbeg Square is a great starting point, lined with imposing buildings boasting magnificent historic architecture, from the strikingly brutalist Opera and Ballet Theatre (also known as the Palace of Culture) to the National History Museum, whose facade is emblazoned with an intricate, Socialist Realism-style mosaic depicting important milestones in the country's history. Nearby is the 18th century Et'hem Bey mosque – approximately 59 per cent of Albania's population is Muslim – with an elegant, hand-painted interior.

For a taste of Hoxha's brutal and terrifying regime, visit Bunk'Art 1 and 2. The museums/art galleries are recreations of the estimated 750,000 underground bunkers Hoxha had built throughout the country between 1960-1980, paranoid about nuclear attacks. From the domed entrance, descend several sets of steps into its gloomy concrete depths to learn more about life under communist rule, from the secret police force to how the regime finally ended.

A short stroll down the elegant main thoroughfare, Bulevardi Dëshmorët e Kombit, reveals more modern structures. One is The Cloud, an art installation by Japanese artist Sou Fujimoto, which relocated from London's Hyde Park in 2016. The second is the Pyramid of Tirana, an extraordinary, spaceship-like construction, formerly a museum dedicated to Hoxha's legacy, and now the TUMO Center for Creative Technologies, aimed at helping young people get skills in industries such as gaming, programming, 3D modelling, robotics and more. You can even climb its exterior, which offers views onto leafy Rinia Park.

Skanderbeg Square is a great starting point, boasting magnificent historic architecture

BUZZ AND BEACHES

Just ten minutes' walk away is one of the city's most exciting neighbourhoods, Blloku. This was where Hoxha, and senior members of his regime, had their homes, and it used to be bleak, grey and uninspiring. Today, it's a hip and

MUSEUM
BUNK'ART 2

THIS PAGE FROM TOP: The Albanian capital of Tirana has plenty to offer travellers; Discover bunkers at Bunk'Art 2 museum; A rendering of the forthcoming Expo Albania

IMAGES: FANI KURTI; USKARP/GETTY IMAGES; ZORANM

lively set of streets reminiscent of London's Soho or New York's East Village, crammed with boutiques, cool bars and a mix of restaurants ranging from straight-down-the-line to the more sophisticated.

Start your evening with a £7 Negroni at the Colonial Cocktail Academy, then chow down on tasty local dishes at Piceri Era such as *petulla te fshira*, a stack of layered thin pancakes cooked with garlic, feta and butter, *patëllxhan i mbushur*, aubergines stuffed with tomato and peppers, or *ragu me jufka*, beef stew with noodles. Albanian cuisine, a blend of Turkish, Italian and Greek, tends towards the hearty side. For a lighter alternative, head to Salt, a stylish Asian-inspired enclave with everything from ceviche to sushi.

Green space in abundance can be found at Tirana's Grand Park, which boasts over 289 hectares of land, a sizeable artificial lake, a zoo and a botanical garden. Another great way to get away from the urban landscape is to take the cable car up to the top of nearby Mount Dajti, which offers spectacular views over forests and lakes from around 1,110 metres above sea level. Alternatively, you can head beyond the city limits to experience the country's many beauty spots.

THIS PAGE FROM TOP: Tirana's leafy Grand Park; The UNESCO-listed towns of Berat and Gjirokastër are worth a visit

BERAT

This UNESCO-listed heritage town is located 90 minutes' drive south of Tirana. Its main draw is the rows and rows of wide, flat-roofed, multi-windowed Ottoman-era houses, layered along the hills through which the Osumi river flows. Take a free walking tour with knowledgeable guide Bruno (@freetourberat), which encompasses the 13th century castle, frescoed Byzantine churches and the elegant Gorica Bridge.

VLORË

A big, bustling seaside town, Vlorë's winding seafront is lined with lively bars and restaurants. It's also home to a serene old town, where cobbled streets house colourful buildings, and you'll find quiet squares with cafés.

GJIROKASTËR

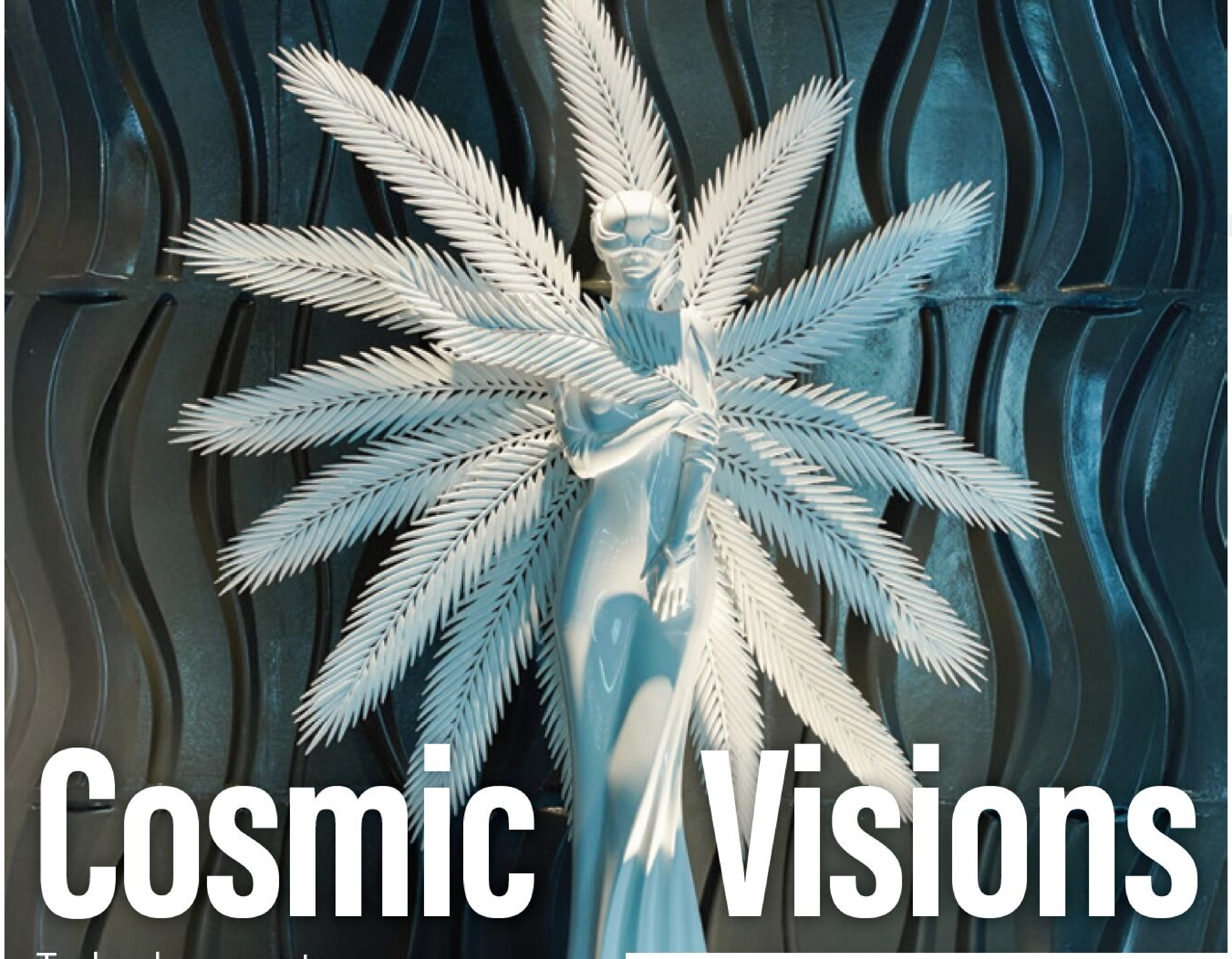
To the south of the country, Gjirokastër is located in a valley between the Gjerë mountains and the Drino river, at 300m above sea level. It's also a UNESCO heritage site, thanks to its imposing castle, which looms above the old town at 336m. Built in the 12th century, and expanded under Ottoman rule in the 1800s, explore its five towers, prison, clock tower, and cistern.

SARANDË

A short drive from Sarandë, another popular seaside town, is a remarkable natural pool. In the centre, a dark, underwater cave resembles a pupil, surrounded by crystal clear aquamarine water – hence its name, Syri I Kalter, 'the blue eye'.

KSAMIL

So what's all the TikTok fuss about? There are dozens of beaches around this little seaside town, with some gaining comparisons to the Maldives. These include Ksamil Beach, Bora Bora Beach, Ksamil Beach 7 and Mirror Beach, thanks to their golden sands and turquoise water. Plan your visit out of season; May is comfortable, and September is still warm and sunny.



Cosmic Visions

Technology meets canvas in international artist **Marina Fedorova's** vision of the future

A figurative artist and painter – whose work was once nominated for the prestigious Kandinsky Prize – Leningrad-born Marina Fedorova travels all over the world to participate in international art fairs. Her work has been showcased in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Paris, Genoa, Malaga, Helsinki, and recently, Dubai – where her "Cosmodreams" exhibition at Fann À Porter, a contemporary gallery that celebrates regional and global artists, drew in art enthusiasts, buyers, and discerning tastemakers.

Art continues to be an intriguing investment for High Net Worth Individuals (HNWIs) and Ultra-High Net Worth Individuals (UNHWIs) across the world. Despite recent global economic volatility, the value of the international art market has been breaking records. Meanwhile, the fusion of traditional art and technology continues to blossom, with immersive art destinations popping up all around the world as a key attraction not just for residents, but also for tourists from across the world. From Washington DC's Artechouse and Paris's Atelier des Lumières to Las Vegas's Area15, art is rapidly becoming a concept that we can increasingly interact with through cutting-edge tech. At Area15, a scrapped Boeing 747 plane will be transformed into an event space with more than 85,000 sq ft of pop-ups and outdoor activities, while in the Middle East, the Saudi-based (and soon, UAE) outposts of the world-renowned teamLab experience are becoming a major draw for travellers.

Fedorova's project is also an immersive experience. The exhibition, which contains multiple virtual elements, explores the effect of technological advancements on our lives and environment. "At first, one of the ideas behind this was to connect with the younger generation," Fedorova says. When the global 2020 pandemic hit, she was inspired to create a virtual museum online. "Then I realised technology was a new tool that could help us tell the story behind each painting," she says. Some of her work features augmented reality, for instance, wherein you can scan a QR code of a painting or sculpture and see the behind-the-scenes work that went into it – or perhaps watch a series of sketches around that same work coming to life in a mini movie, with scripts that Fedorova wrote herself.

"It merges [the work] into a universe that allows people to completely immerse themselves into it," she says. Once, she hosted a fashion show on "another planet" that could be viewed through futuristic glasses. Fedorova has never thought that digital art could replace the traditional, however – "[Think of it this way]: A theatre still exists even though it was invented before cinema. And now, even when we can have Netflix at home, we still go to the cinema to watch a movie," she explains. "But with technology moving so fast, it is important to stay ahead of the curve in order to stay relevant. For example, some video art or scenarios that we produced three, four, or even two years ago can look outdated today. Technology evolves so fast that you always need to be aligned with what's new." Like any creative, artifical intelligence has been on her mind: "I'm always afraid that what if it's going to be better than me? But there still needs to be a creative mind behind art, otherwise it's just a beautiful boring picture," she explains. "I see more positive sides to technology than negative ones. Photoshop appeared when I was a student, for instance. We were afraid of its impact on how we would create illustrations. But then I understood that this could just give me a new opportunity – for example, I can now paint on an iPad as well as a physical canvas. It's a new opportunity."

As the Middle East art scene continues to grow, Fedorova is excited to explore more of it. Although she's been coming to the UAE for several years now already, when she first arrived, she was surprised to discover how different it was from what she had come to believe about the region while growing up, especially as a figurative artist. "I was very positively surprised when I came here for the first time," she says, explaining that even in the art scene specifically, she was happy to discover that "there are a lot of artists and a lot of human images, and it's very positively accepted." She believes that the region is a good place to tell more of her stories; "I was very warmly welcomed here. The people are warm and receptive, and it's a pleasure to have exhibitions here, to have feedback with and communicate with people here."

Through "Cosmodreams", Fedorova says she wants people to feel like they've just seen a beautiful dream, or travelled to another mental plane. She wants it to inspire people's imagination through inspiring fantasies, and evoke positive emotions about foreign worlds that can help our minds grow. And with the way the Middle East is evolving – with its own grand visions for the future that might, to some, feel like a fantastical future dreamed out of thin air – and the more she establishes her presence in the region, she's certainly in the right place.

IMAGES: SUPPLIED

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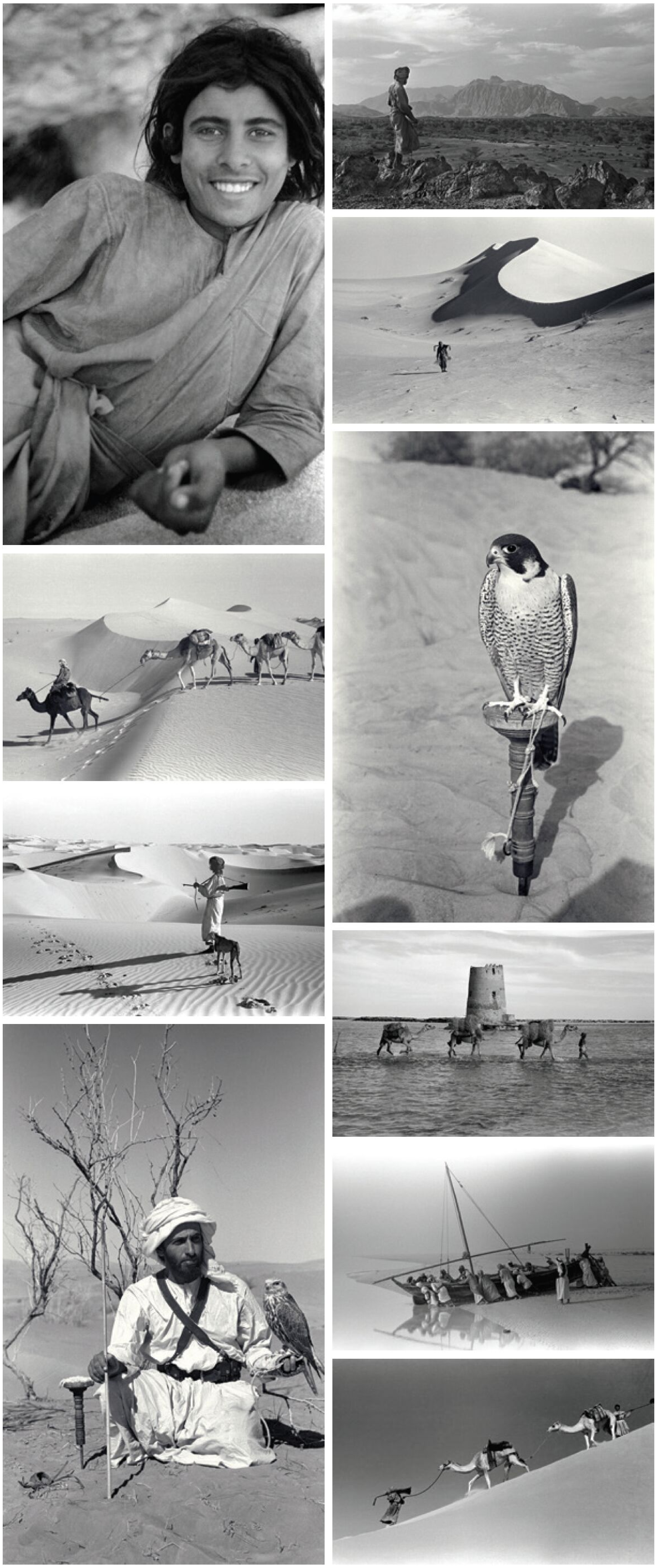

Business Traveller MIDDLE EAST

the Report

Tried, Tested, Tasted.

TRIED AND TESTED **HOTEL**

InterContinental Residences Dubai Business Bay, an IHG Hotel 58

Biltmore Hotel Villas Dubai 59

Renaissance Business Bay Hotel, Dubai 60

TRIED AND TESTED **RESTAURANT**

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SMART TRAVELLER

Our guide to... immersive digital art experiences in the Middle East 64

InterContinental Residences Dubai Business Bay, an IHG Hotel

BACKGROUND Opened in September 2024, this property offers luxury hotel rooms, suites, and residences for visiting guests and long-term stays alike. Its priority is in enhancing the guest experience – whether through its facilities, its sense of community, or scientifically-researched food and beverage programmes aimed at helping improve health and happiness. A pet-friendly hotel, the property has dedicated floors for long-term guests that welcome furry friends, with special amenities provided for them along with helpful tips being shared before arrival.

WHERE IS IT? In the heart of Dubai's bustling Business Bay area, a 10-minute drive from Dubai Mall, and a 20-minute drive from Dubai International Airport. Located alongside the Al Jadaf Dubai Canal that runs from Jumeirah Beach through the Downtown and Business Bay area all the way to Dubai Creek, the property offers spectacular views of the Burj Khalifa.

> I took my two cats with me, and was touched by the sincerely warm welcome

WHAT'S IT LIKE? This elegant property is luxurious yet comfortable, never sacrificing one for the sake of the other. It offers a rare true sense of being a home away from home, from its incredibly friendly and welcoming staff – who really seemed to put in the time and effort to make every guest feel like a second family – to the thoughtful details found all around, from the homey accessories placed in its light-filled rooms, to the prioritisation of its functional aspects. Testing out its pet-friendliness, I took my two cats with me, and was touched by the sincerely warm welcome. In the room was a selection of litter options, high-quality food, meal bowls, and some sweet little pet beds. Many of the staff exhibited a clear love for animals too, making us feel safe and supported with our unique needs.

ROOMS There are 176 serviced residences, from studios to three-bedroom options. All of them feature a soothing colour palette and fine finishings, and top-notch appliances (including water purifiers, to maintain its commitment to sustainability). Our suite had a kitchenette, and the couches were already prepared with pet-friendly blankets and heartfelt welcome notes before we even checked in.

BEST FOR
Long stay guests

DON'T MISS
A stroll up and down the nearby canal walk

PRICE
Internet rates for March start from Dhs600 per night for a king studio

CONTACT
Marasi Drive, Business Bay; 0800 012 0003

FOOD AND DRINK There are three venues: 57 Deli Cafe, with outstanding sandwiches and other wholesome light meals, great coffee, and more; Alto, a poolside bar with small bites and refreshments; and Ancora, a Mediterranean restaurant with a cozy interior, peaceful canal-side views outdoors, and a thoughtful menu with fresh seafood, grilled meats, flavourful produce, and brick oven-cooked pizzas made entirely in-house. Breakfast is varied and moreish, with an upscale yet homely feel, and there's a solid room service menu with fast, friendly service.

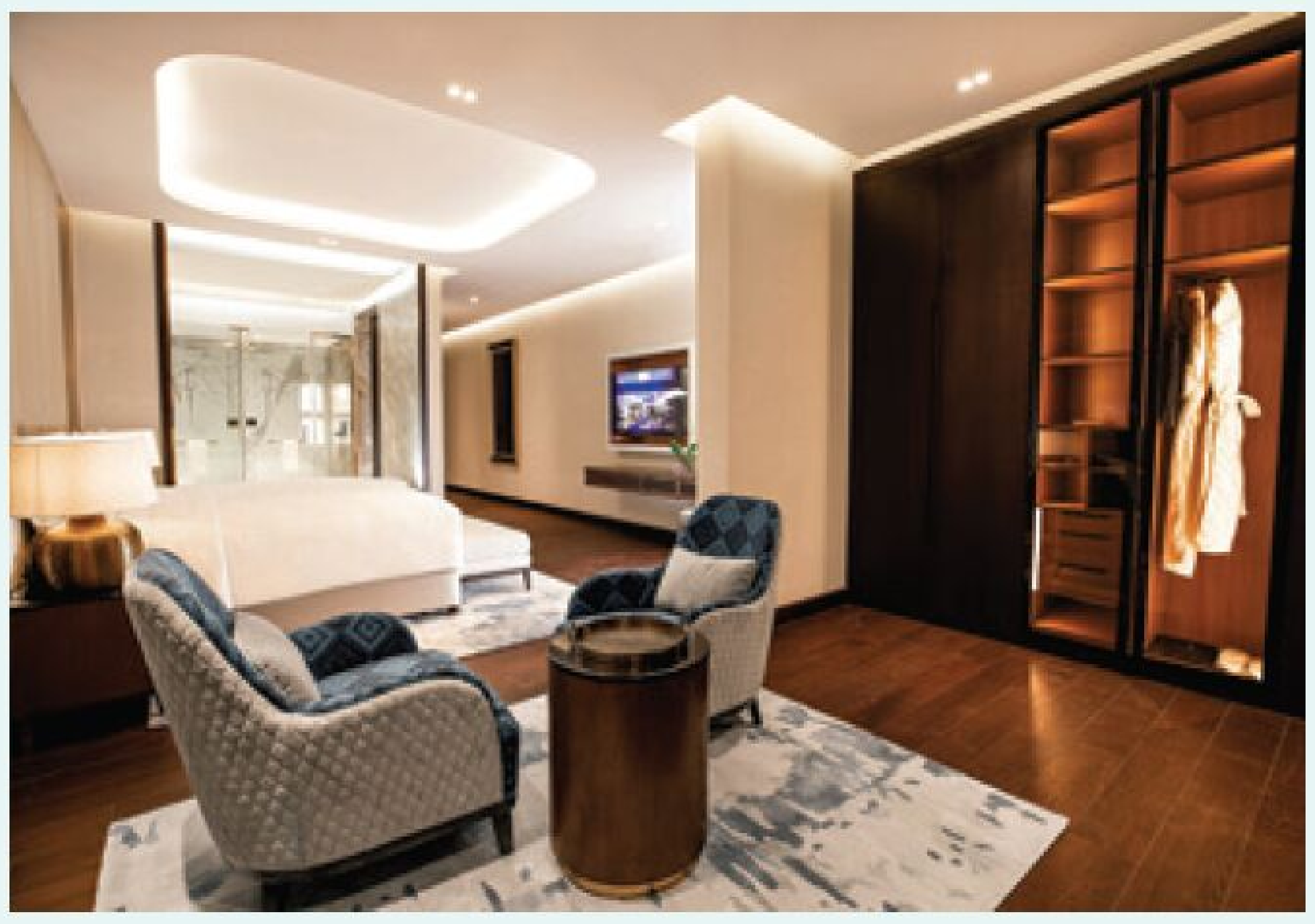
MEETINGS The business centre area off the lobby is tranquil and functional, with two Apple monitors available and an ambiance that's good for productivity. While it doesn't have specific meeting rooms, every suite comes with a cozy desk and/or table setup great for working from.

LEISURE There's a rooftop pool with great views. On the same floor, you'll find a sauna, fully-equipped gym with Technogym equipment, and a kids club so delightful you'll wish that adults could play in there too. There's a regular roster of community-centric, wellness-focused activities available, from yoga sessions to Wim Hof-certified cold plunge therapy sessions, and more.

VERDICT This place made me remember the real meaning of the term "hospitality" – run by a team that is so genuine in wanting to make guests feel welcome and cared for, it's hard not to want to return. ***Yi-Hwa Hanna***

IMAGES: YI-HWA HANNA

بيلتمور فلل فندقية
THE BILTMORE
HOTEL VILLAS
THE BILTMORE



Biltmore Hotel Villas Dubai

BACKGROUND The US brand has opened a luxury complex of villas in the heart of Barsha, its first hotel opening in the UAE, offering the perfect urban hideaway for large families or groups of friends to holiday in the heart of Dubai.

WHERE IS IT? Right next to Mall of the Emirates, the complex is in the heart of Dubai. Easy access to Sheikh Zayed Road means nothing is far away, whether it's the famous slopes of the indoor skiing at the mall, the airport, conference centres, beaches or the city's wealth of attractions. However, some villas or rooms are perched beside the main road so pack a pair of ear plugs if you're a sensitive sleeper like me.

BEST FOR

Families looking for accommodations with ultra high-end luxury and privacy

DON'T MISS

Pool time; the outdoor pools also have a built-in spa bath function, making them the perfect add-on to your pampering

PRICE

Internet rates starting at around Dhs15,000 per night for the three bedroom villa, going up depending on the season

CONTACT

+971 4 308 5555; h1034.info@biltmorecollection.com

WHAT'S IT LIKE? Each villa is designed with the utmost attention to detail, from the delicate lighting along the stair rails to the Arabic calligraphy and Mashrabiya-style carvings in the hallways to give a true sense of place. Modern meets traditional Arabian, it is a private butler-serviced villa with all the amenities of a luxury hotel. There are 20 villas, ranging from a 610 sqm three bedroom to a 65 sqm four bedroom, and a 1,350 sqm five bedroom option.

ROOMS I loved that in my three-bedroom villa, the downstairs bedroom had a mobility-friendly bedroom and bathroom, a really unusual benefit for older or special needs travellers. Each villa has a lift, two drive-up underground parking spots with direct access to the basement, a maid or driver's room, with kitchen and laundry facilities to make sure guests feel very much at home. Furnishings are luxurious, using prime materials such as fine marble and heavy wood finishings. Guests don't even need to leave the villa, with in-villa check in and check-out, a pool, and a private cinema in the basement of every villa. Balconies come off most bedrooms, offering both indoor and outdoor spaces, and a chance for everyone to find their own little sanctuary. In the bedrooms, digital is the name of the game with the likes of high-tech toilets and spa bath tubs. Even accessories are luxurious, like the hairdryer being the latest Dyson model.

FOOD AND DRINK The hotel has its own cosy restaurant, Brasserie, as well as an entrecôte steak house on the complex. A private chef service is available for groups who want a special, more personal touch.

> It is a private butler-serviced villa with all of the amenities of a luxury hotel

MEETINGS A flexible-use boardroom with a capacity of eight people is available, with LED displays, high speed wifi, and more.

LEISURE The property has a fantastic, well-equipped gym, with plenty of floor space and a good range of equipment. Extremely clean, there is a personal trainer on hand for people looking for some extra motivation. I indulged in a 45-minute massage at the Coya Spa, where guests can also use the steam and sauna during this perfect urban escape.

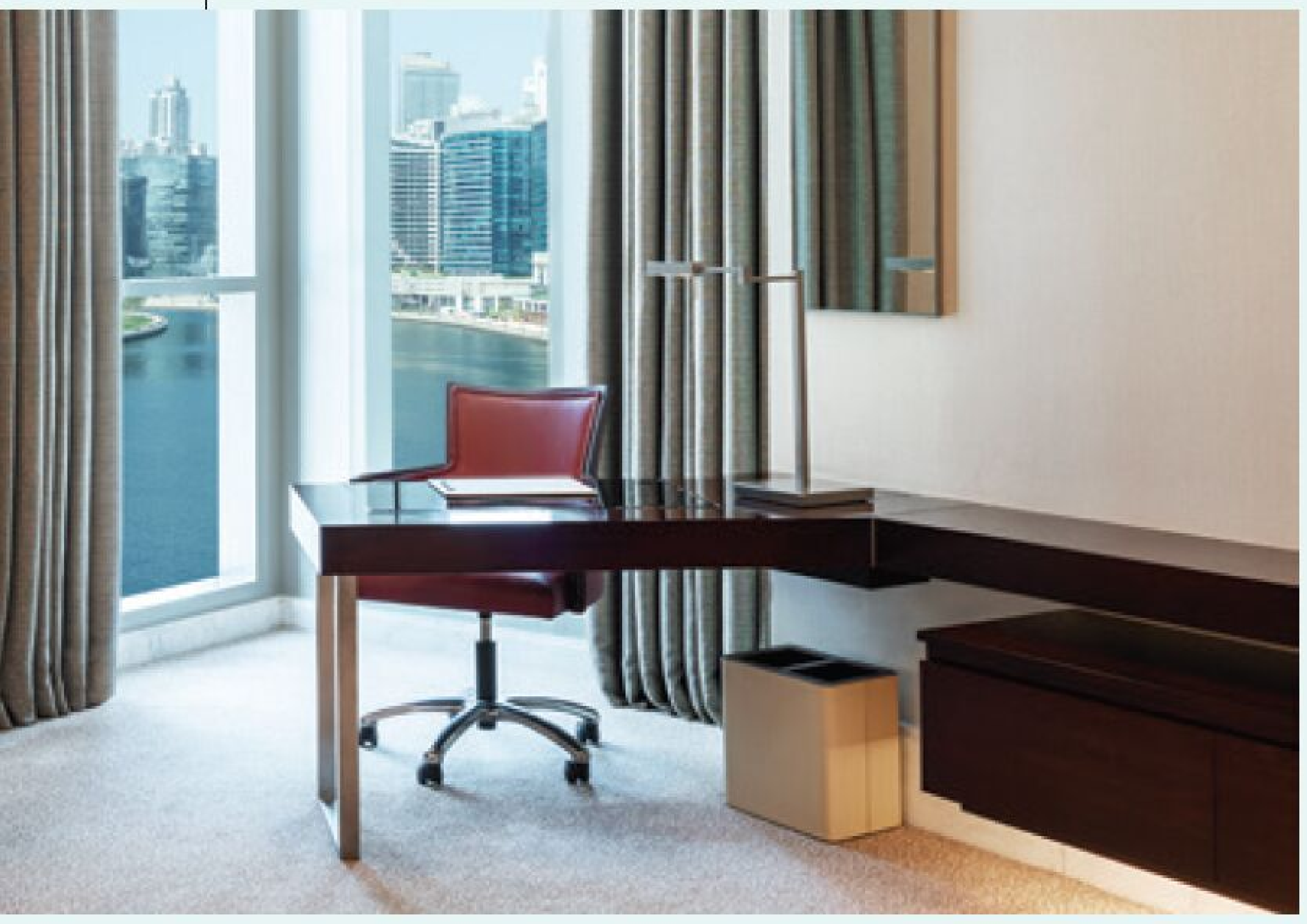
VERDICT This is the perfect spot for big families or groups of friends, but is more of a niche property for the HNWI and beyond end of the market. ***Melanie Swan***

Renaissance Business Bay Hotel, Dubai

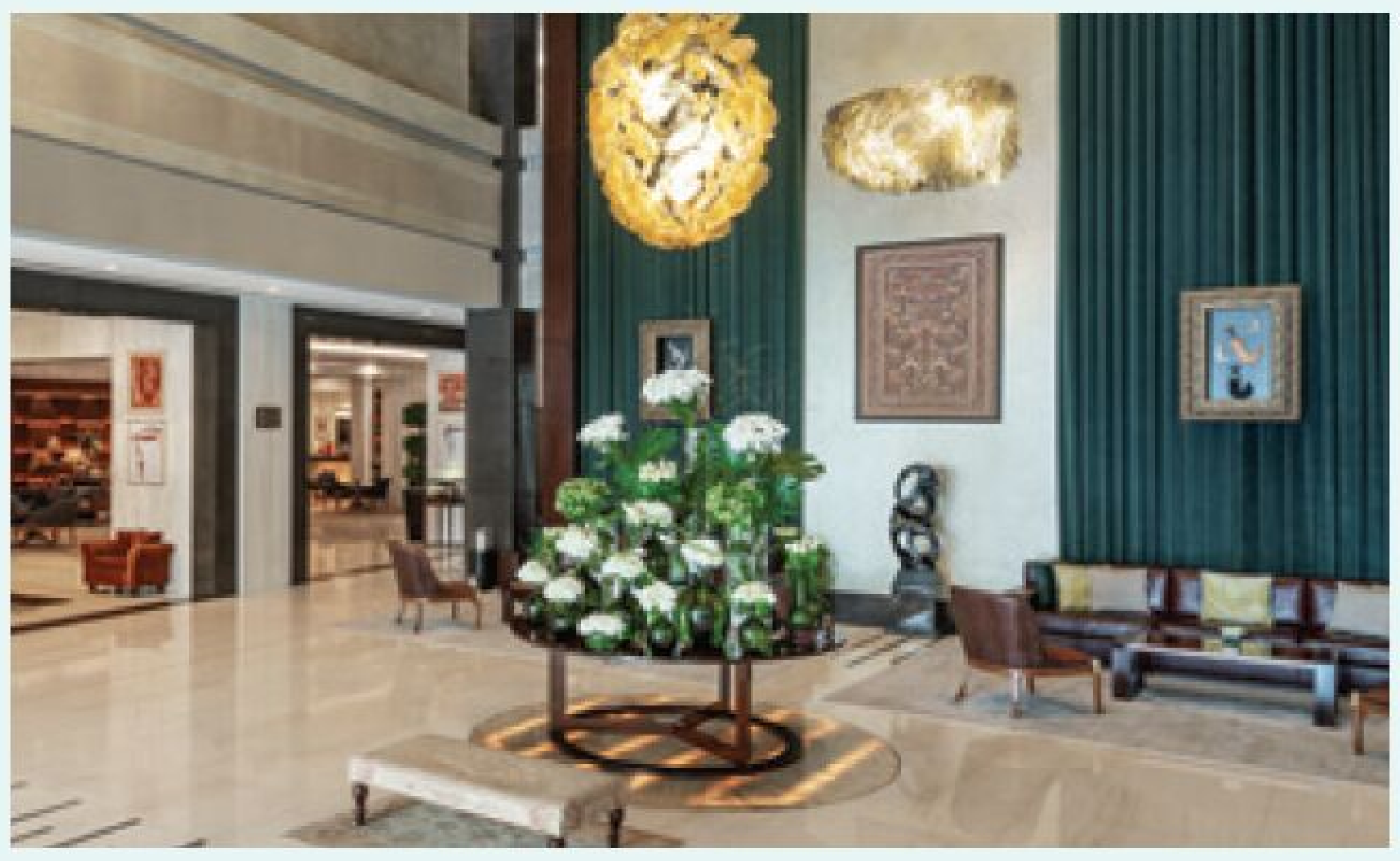
BACKGROUND Opened in October 2024, this property took over the site of what was formerly the Grand Millennium Business Bay, rebranding it as a Renaissance Hotel – part of the Marriott Bonvoy portfolio.

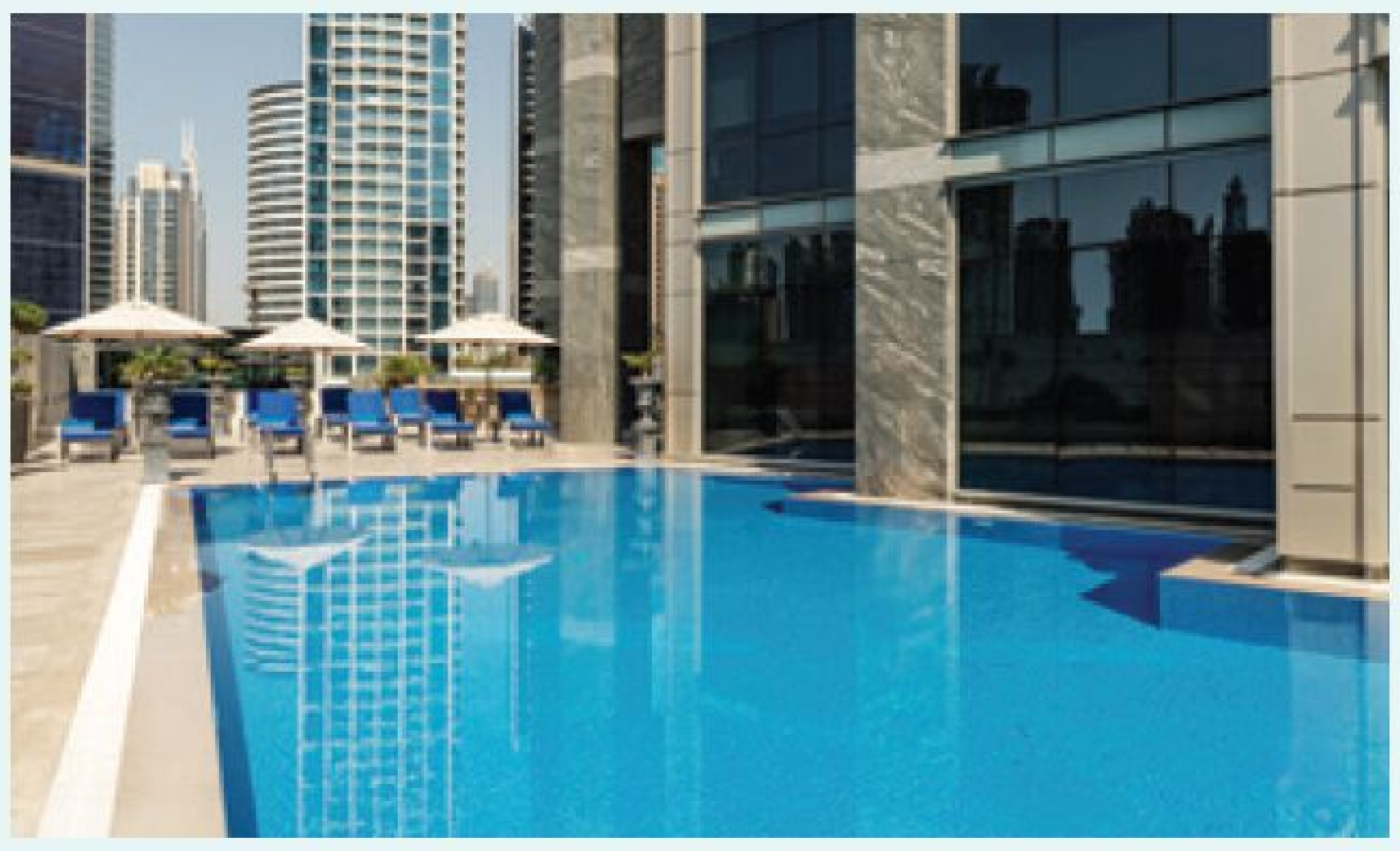
WHERE IS IT? Located canal-side in the thriving Business Bay part of Dubai, it's joined a growing strip of hotels that offer guests beautiful waterside views and easy access to key business districts as well as lifestyle haunts. It's an easy hop and skip onto the highway, a 15 minute drive from Dubai International Airport, and an 18-20 minute drive from Dubai Marina.

WHAT'S IT LIKE? This hotel seems to epitomise the concept of "business in the front, party in the back." The Renaissance brand has undergone a global refresh in identity in recent years, offering a stay with local flavour and the chance for unexpected discoveries, but without sacrificing the little luxuries and service that a high-end hotel can offer. For instance, the rooms have beautiful, functional desk spaces that are a dream for business travellers who actually need to get work done – but when you're ready to let off some steam, there's a buzzy restaurant scene as well as a stunning pool in which to unwind, relax, and recharge.



ROOMS There are 251 rooms and suites, all of which feature Italian marble bathrooms and tall windows, offering views of either the iconic Dubai skyline or the peaceful canal. The rooms are spacious, with incredibly comfortable, plush beds – the classic luxury kind that travellers wish to stay at a high-end hotel for – with beautiful desks, grand bathrooms, and plenty of natural sunlight.





FOOD AND DRINK There's quite a delightful variety of dining at this hotel, and it's a distinct part of the appeal of staying here. For a stylish meal with canal-side views, award-winning restaurant Asia Asia is a delicious journey of Pan Asian cuisine, while if you're in the mood for Italian, Bella on the top floor offers refined steaks, pasta, and more in an elegant setting complete with rooftop seating. In the mood for a party? Lock, Stock, and Barrel will have you covered. At breakfast, The Podium is a uniquely cozy, relaxing space that makes you feel as though you're dining in a well-connected friend's beautiful living room. The hotel also has an excellent room service menu, as well as a series of "Evenings At Renaissance" events four nights a week, wherein guests and locals can relax with live music, networking opportunities, arts and culture, and more.

> The rooms have beautiful, functional desk spaces that are a dream for business travellers

MEETINGS The hotel has 11 flexible meeting rooms, and a grand ballroom that can fit up to 400 guests. It will also soon launch the REN Meetings offering: a service that enhances the use of their event spaces with curated networking and entertainment opportunities.

LEISURE There's a well-equipped gym filled with modern equipment, on the same floor as its beautiful outdoor pool. You'll even find a salon there. Alas, the staff wasn't able to arrange a massage at the spa for me in the end, but the sauna, steam room, and spa bath were a delight to use.

VERDICT A great combination of work and play for the busy traveller who doesn't want to have to choose between either. *Yi-Hwa Hanna*

BEST FOR
Business travellers

DON'T MISS
Dinner at Asia Asia on the second floor

PRICE
Internet rates in March start from Dhs600 a night for a Deluxe Bay View room, or Dhs800 for a Club King Room

CONTACT
Marasi Drive,
Business Bay, Dubai;
+971 4 873 3333;
marriott.com

Studio Frantzén Dubai

BACKGROUND The first Dubai-based restaurant from world-renowned chef Björn Frantzén – a Swedish former pro footballer – it serves à la carte fusion Asian and French cuisine with Nordic influences. While Studio Frantzén is a more "normal" dining experience than its sibling restaurant FZN – another Frantzén concept with a nine-course tasting menu in an exclusive two-storey space – there is nothing ordinary about its unique approach to fine dining.

THE VENUE It's at Atlantis, The Palm, just past the aquarium, and right next door to FZN. You're welcomed by the image of a giant bear head (Björn means "bear" in Swedish) after which entering the restaurant feels like falling into an *Alice In Wonderland*-style bolthole of curious and delicious joys.

WHAT'S IT LIKE? You'll enter through a sultry and dimly-lit cocktail lounge before going into the main salon. Here, you'll find tables including half-moon shaped booths and seats at the chef's counter, all in bright, seductive colours, with kitsch tchotchkes giving it a surprisingly homey albeit chic feel. The music is equally as eccentric, with everything from classic rock and roll to upbeat 80s pop songs, from playlists curated by the chef himself. The result is a place that takes the concept of ambience seriously, except in this case, the only part that's no laughing matter is the high standards of the food – the mood itself is not serious at all, and that's a great thing. There is something undeniably playful, slightly fantastical, and almost hedonistic about being here. If you could imagine that a well-to-do character in an old James Bond film had invited you to an extraordinary meal at their glamorous home, this would be it.

> It feels like falling into an *Alice In Wonderland*-style bolthole of delicious joys

FOOD AND DRINKS I could fill an entire page with a soliloquy on how incredible the food is here. Chef Frantzén is acclaimed for a reason, and when it comes to unexpected yet unforgettable flavour profiles, he's a bit of a savant. The laminated milk bread to start, served with a honey-drizzled blonde miso butter that you'll want to lick from the bowl, is so pillow-soft and moreish you'll likely crave it for breakfast the next day. A smorgasbord of cauliflower served both roasted and pickled, with hazelnuts, crispy parmesan, and lashings of truffle with a cooling galangal vinaigrette blew me away. The "Scandinavian Sushi" – including a king grab gunkan with fermeted carrot "hot sauce" and finger lime; wagyu nigiri with mushroom miso and enoki; and "mushroom tea" with silken tofu and lemon thyme – felt like an explosion of taste in each bite. The Japanese Saroma A5 Wagyu beef, enhanced by oxtail ponzu sauce, literally melts in your mouth, while the deep-fried Hasselback potato with browned butter and cream cheese might just be the crispiest spud you'll ever eat. Beyond the tastes, the textures stood out. You can enjoy everything from the crunchy and silky to the velvety, flaky, juicy, sticky, buttery, creamy, and more. Dessert is a journey in itself: you'll be taken to the Candy Room, a mini *Willy Wonka*-worthy paradise where you can choose from stunning cakes, tarts, and puddings, soft-serve ice cream, and even pick n mix sweets.

SERVICE Despite the pedigree of its chef, there is nothing at all pretentious about this place. The staff are oustanding, not just because they are friendly, but because it's so clearly sincere. During our visit, assistant manager Emmett visited every single table to greet people personally, while our waiter Ilia was a mind-reader, instantly recommending the cocktail of my dreams, or bonding with us over jokes. The staff here seem to genuinely take pleasure in seeing people enjoy their restaurant, from the smiling bar staff to the enthusiastic folks in the Candy Room.

VERDICT One of the most fresh, exciting additions to Dubai's culinary scene, it more than lives up to the hype. ***Yi-Hwa Hanna***

HOURS

Open daily for dinner, from 6pm to 1am; and for lunch on weekends from 12-4pm

LOCATION

Atlantis, The Palm; The Palm Jumeirah

DRESS CODE

Smart Casual

CONTACT

studiofrantzendubai.com

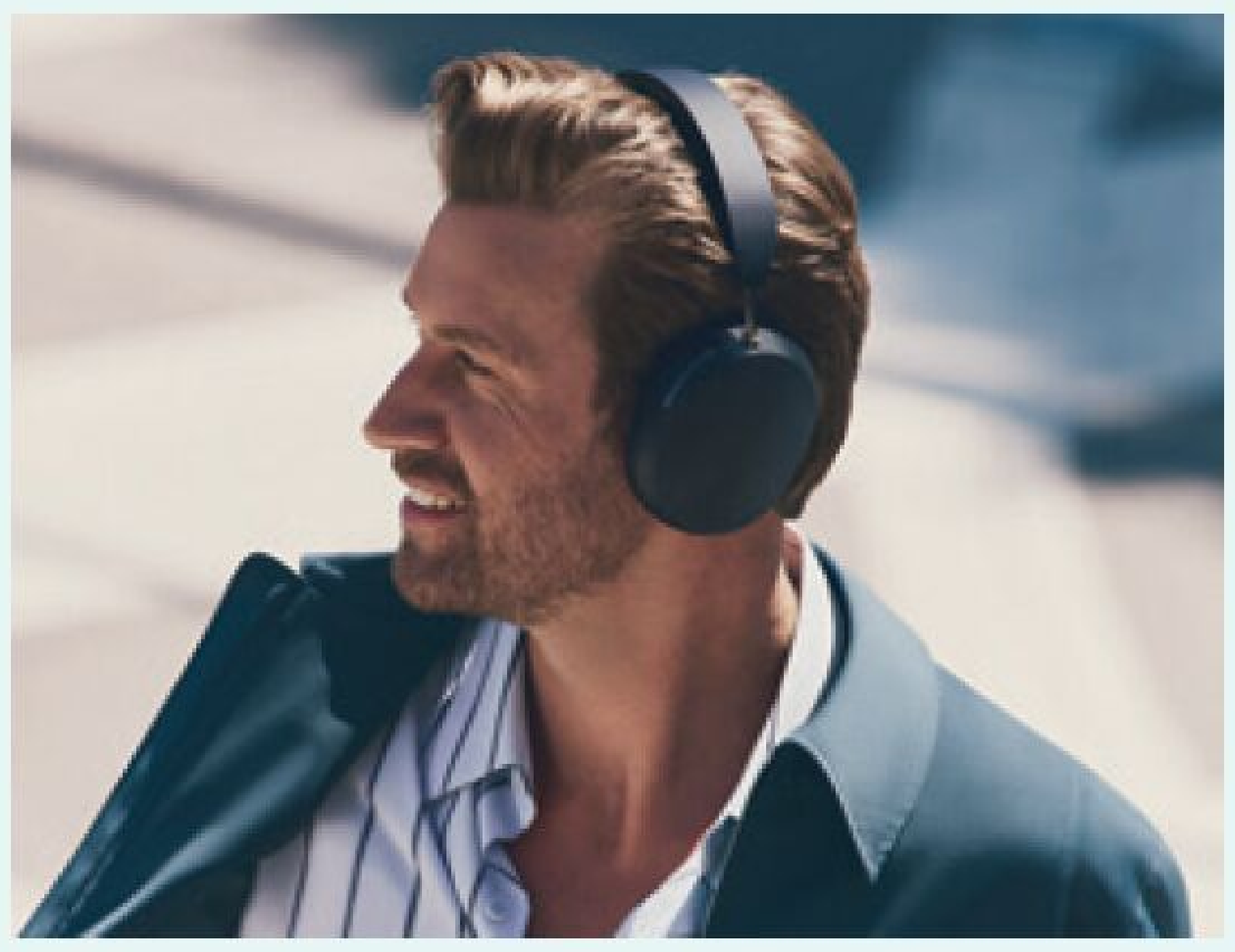
Sonos Ace

BACKGROUND These are the first-ever headphones produced by the American audio company known for its multi-room home audio offering. The company was founded in 2002, and these noise-cancelling wireless bluetooth headphones were released during summer 2024. Sonos sells home audio solutions with patented wireless syncing, portable soundbars, and more, developed by Oscar and Grammy award-winning producers, mixers, and artists. In terms of competition, they're presented as a premium offering in competition with Bose's QuietComfort Ultra Headphones and Bang & Olufsen's Beoplay HX.

THE PRODUCT The items come in a neatly-packed box with instructions tucked underneath the hardshell carry case. Even the case, made of moisture-proof recycled materials, comes wrapped in a felt wrapping. The product is supplied with two types of USB-C cables. A QR code for the Sonos app is provided in the instructions, and you're encouraged to download it to customize settings, like adjusting EQ, changing noise control modes, or to set up a TV Audio Swap with a supported speaker. Among the list of features is active Noise Cancellation, Dolby Atmos sound, dyamic head tracking and wear detection, and a 30-hour battery life. In terms of hardware, the ear cushions are made of vegan leather, stuffed with soft ear cups made in part with recycled plastic, and lie atop a stainless stell headband, all weighing around 323g.

Pairing was quick and easy, taking just a few minutes even with downloading and signing up to the app, but I was prompted to download a software update for the headphones instantly, which took another 10 minutes. Once I was finally in, the straight-from-the-box headphones had 36 per cent battery life. A full charge took three hours.

The headband is adjustable, and there are playback control buttons on the side to play, pause, skip or repeat tracks, and adjust volume (of course), as well as accept or decline phone calls, and activate an in-built voice assistant. I've tried multiple overhead headphones over the years, from the aforementioned competitors as well as Skullcandy and Sony, and thus far, these have had the most comfortable fit. The difference between the Noise Cancellation and Aware Mode function is distinct, without the uncomfortablly tight vaccuum sensation I've felt with other options. The cups are comfortable enough for extremely long wear, and the sound quality sublime, with rich, multi-layered, well-balanced profiles.



VERDICT A stylish, functional product that delivers on its promises and stands proud against competitiors, that would make for a solid choice for business executives and leisure users alike. ***Yi-Hwa Hanna***

PRICE
Dhs2,099

CONTACT
soundexperience.co

Philips Dictation VoiceTracer Pen

BACKGROUND Philips launched this hybrid pen and recording device in 2023, a discreet and futuristic alternative to the old-school dictaphone. The nifty device resembles something out of Q's box of spy gadgets in James Bond, with the recording device hidden within a nondescript pen.

THE PRODUCT While using this device, I had to regularly remind myself that I was not Jane Bond or an undercover investigative journalist but rather a business travel correspondent ethically flagging that I was recording the meeting – and ensuring quotes are, in fact, 'on the record.'

To any outsider, the device looks like a standard pen – but the handler is aware of a sneaky switch beneath the Philips branding to turn on the recording, plus a USB C port concealed within the stylus-like tip – for charging and transferring files to your laptop. The device also comes with a USB C to USB A adapter cable, should you need it.

The device can record up to 129 hours of audio, with a 360-degree microphone to pick up voices throughout the room, and it has 32GB of memory.

I found the pen to be super compact, convenient and more professional than phone recordings. The device also fulfils its purpose as a pen, so you can take notes during the recording – the perfect marriage of digital and analogue.

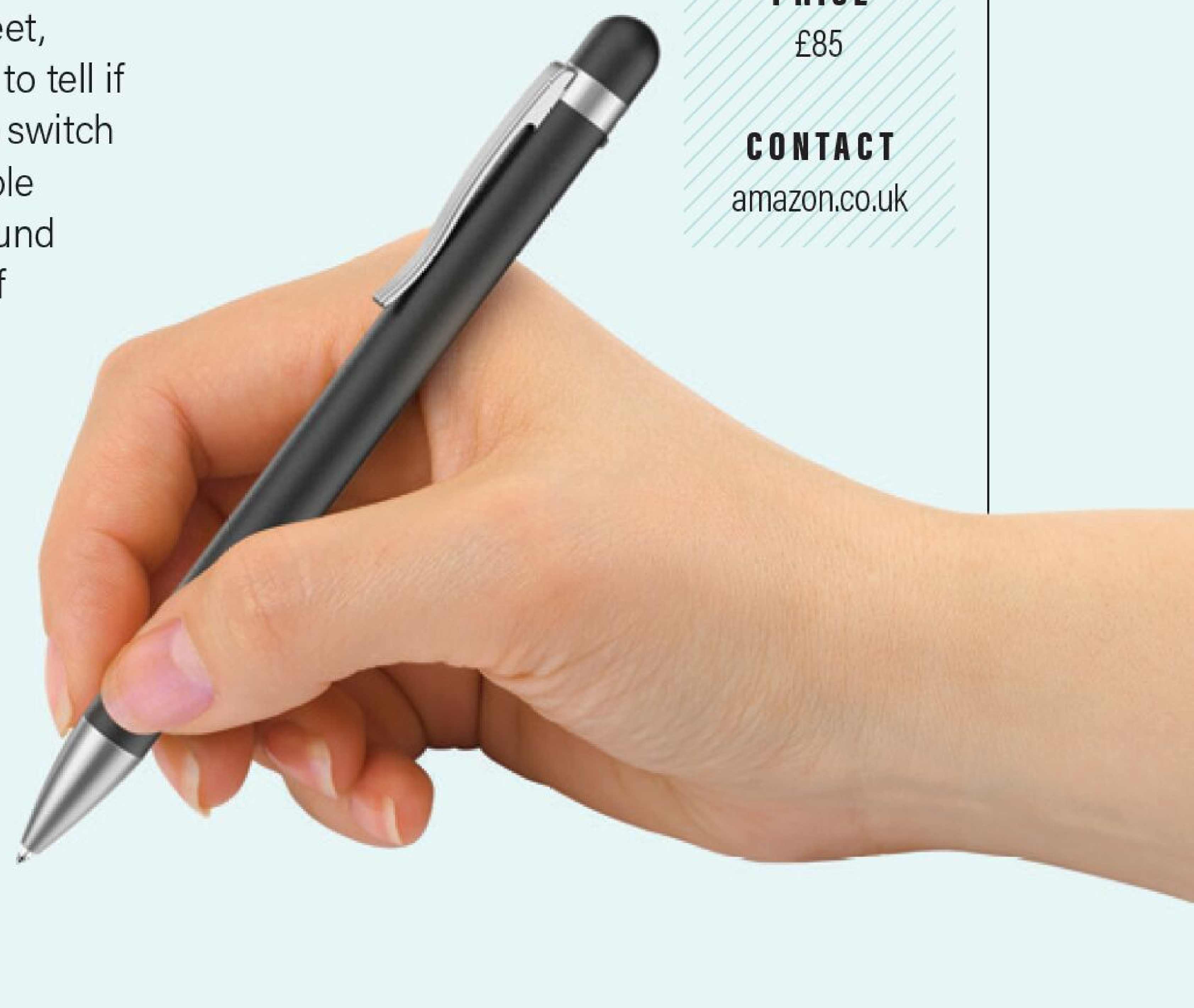
The trouble with it being so discreet, however, is that it's sometimes hard to tell if it's recording – and easy to forget to switch off. A little red light is just about visible behind the clip when it's on, but I found myself accidentally recording myself walking down the road – which made for a very boring playback.

Every journalist knows the tedious nature of transcribing, but this pen comes with a voucher for Sembly AI's speech-to-text cloud software, which transcribes your audio recordings. The voucher gives customers 15 hours of free uploads, which is definitely handy – though the Sembly service took longer than expected and occasionally messed up words or inserted a full stop when someone drew a long breath.

VERDICT A smart pen that does the trick for writing as well as audio recordings – just make sure you hit record when you need to and turn it off when you're out and about. ***Hannah Brandler***

PRICE
£85

CONTACT
amazon.co.uk



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WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

Our guide to...
immersive digital art experiences in the Middle East

From futuristic dreamlike landscapes to interactive installations that mentally transport us to another world, a range of immersive new art experiences in the region are offering visitors a glimpse into the future of visual storytelling. Whether you're seeking a bit of inspiration, a spot of tranquility, or sheer digital spectacle, these venues are reshaping the way we engage with creativity. While the traditional gallery experience still offers an irreplaceable appeal, these five standouts for digital and immersive experiences are pushing the boundaries of creative expression.

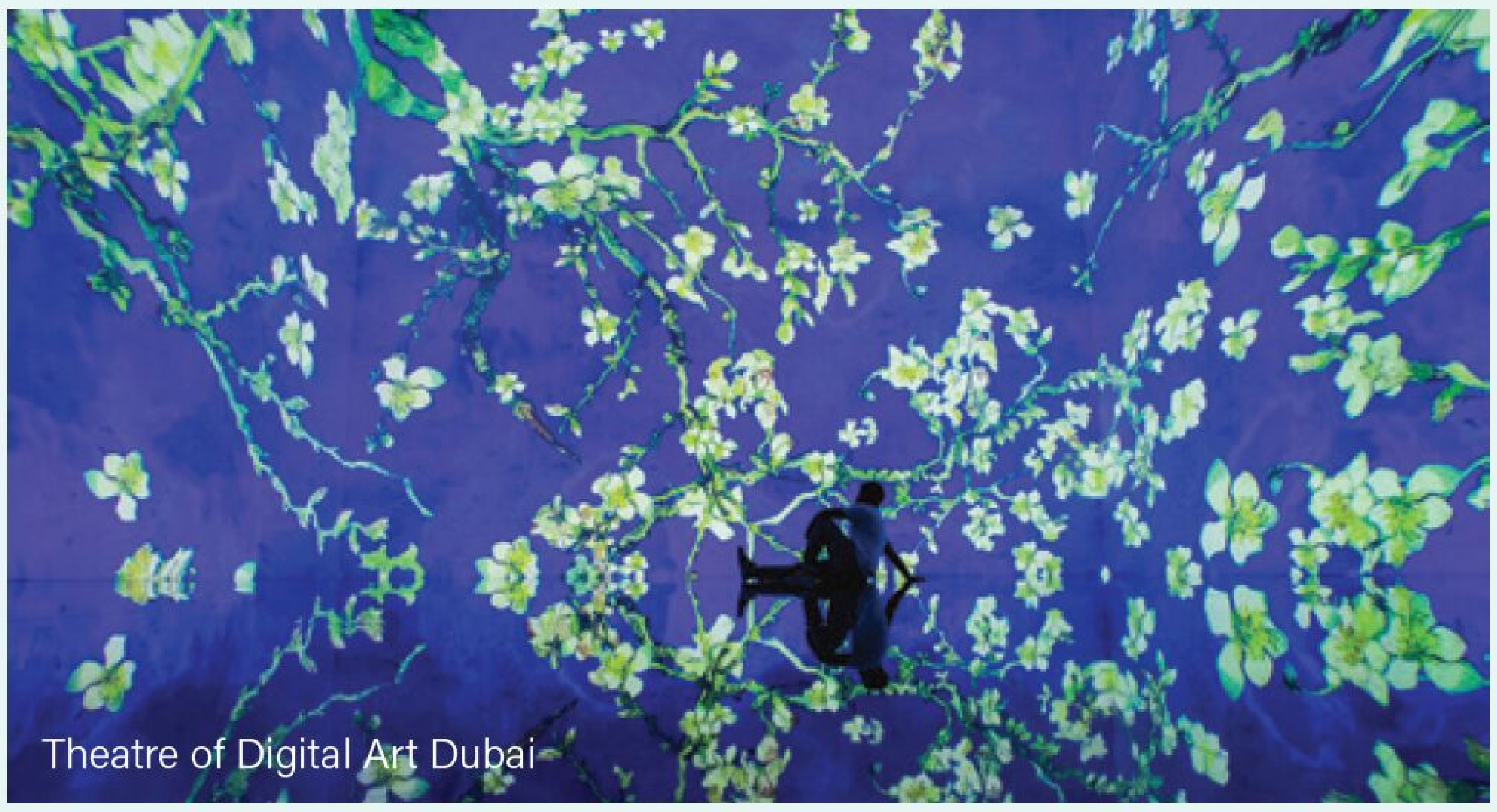
Arte Museum Dubai

Hailing from South Korea, Arte Museum Dubai delivers a mesmerising display of digital artistry through nature-inspired themes. Visitors can explore vast high-resolution projections of ocean waves, lush forests, and cosmic galaxies, all enhanced by immersive soundscapes by award-winning musicians, and ambient scents crafted by a renowned perfumer. The space aims to evoke emotion, through a multisensory journey that feels both surreal and serene, and blurs the lines between art and reality. It also has a F&B space, for an enriched teahouse experience. *artemuseum.com/dubai*

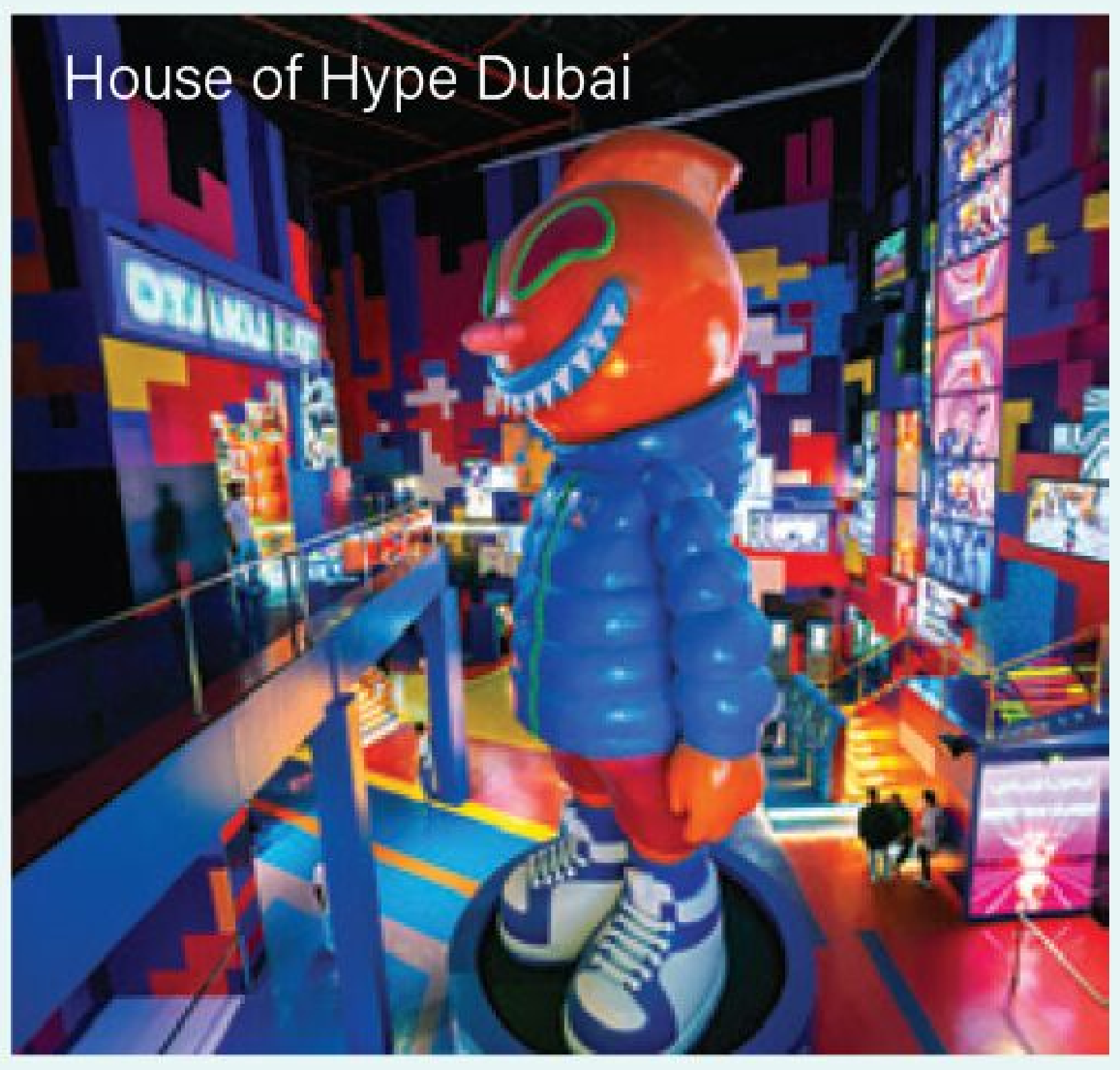
Theatre of Digital Art Dubai

This boutique-style theatre offers a wide variety of creative experiences, from interactive displays that reinvent traditional masterpieces, to wellness sessions (such as healing sound baths) and live music performances, all of which are enhanced with cutting-edge visual and auditory technology. Whatever the exhibition, the Theatre of Digital Art (also known as ToDA) promises a fully-immersive, 360-degree spectacle that captures all the senses. ToDA can also cater to private events, as well as hosting workshops for adults and kids alike – and there's a lovely little café on the premises. *toda.ae*

Arte Museum Dubai


Theatre of Digital Art Dubai

teamLab Borderless Jeddah


House of Hype Dubai

Aya Universe Dubai

teamLab Borderless Jeddah

Opened to much fanfare in June 2024, the Saudi outpost of the globally-renowned teamLab Borderless museum was the brand's first in the region. Located in Jeddah's Culture Square, it's as innovative as the art collective's original experiences in Japan. The museum – which also has outlets in Beijing, Macao, Singapore, Miami, and New York, with Abu Dhabi and Hamburg to open soon – is known for its interactive installations. With the goal of creating a "world of artworks without boundaries", visitors to this "museum without a map" will find themselves immersed in a world of fluid light, shifting colours, and touch-responsive landscapes that transform with every movement. No two visits here will ever be quite the same. The surrealist displays are equally delightful for capturing for use on social media, as they are for helping you switch off from the real world completely. Take some photos, then put your phone away to immerse yourself completely. *teamlab.art/e/borderless-jeddah*

Aya Universe Dubai

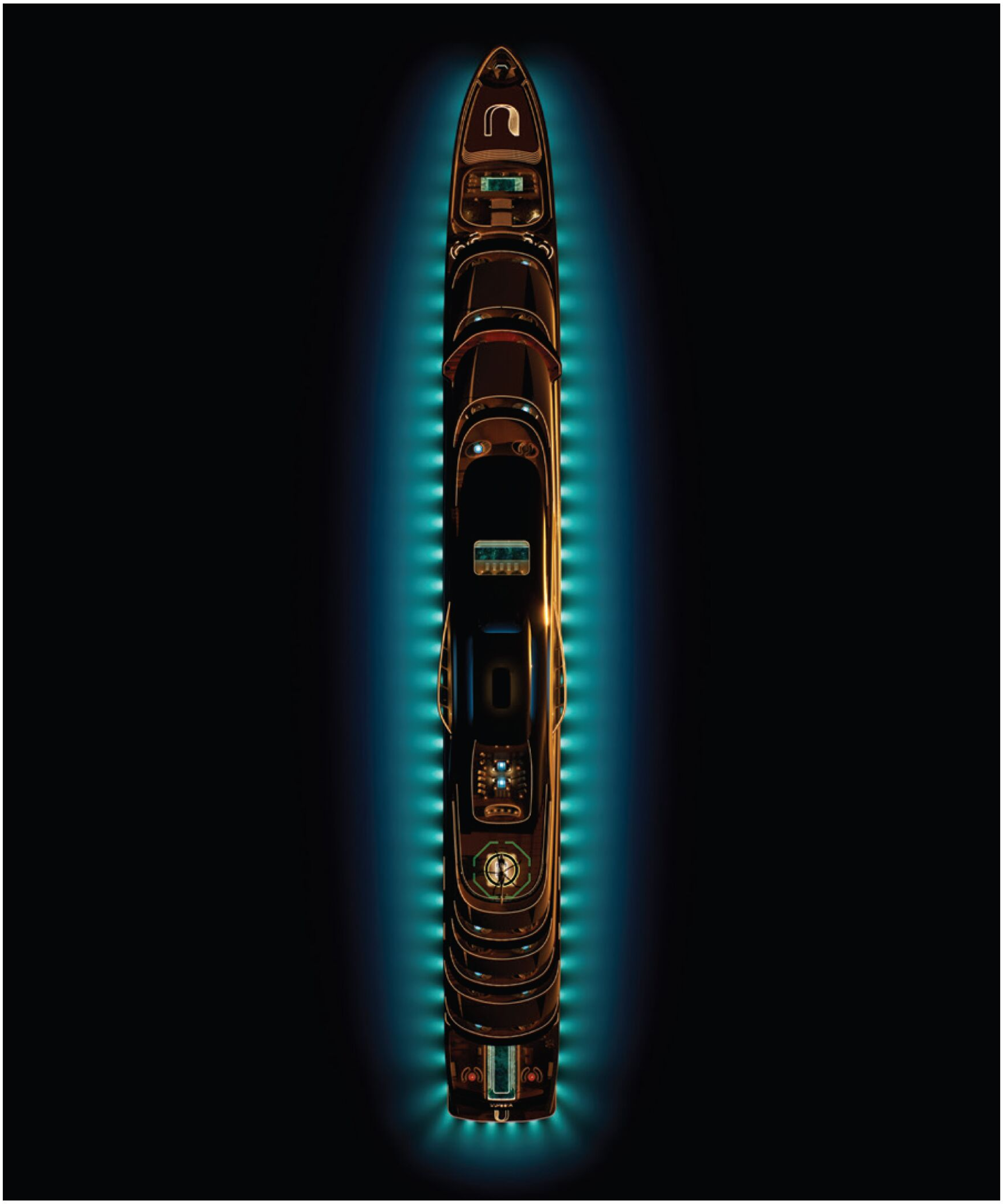
A digital playground that offers a "hidden sanctuary beyond the stars", this immersive wonderland is full of futuristic dreamscapes divided into multiple surreal realms. Visitors travel through 12 zones with glowing portals, celestial chambers, and gravity-defying landscapes. The venue uses cutting-edge projection mapping, responsive floors, and motion sensors to create a deeply interactive journey. Created by leading global experiential attractions developer HyperSpace, it's a stunning blend of escapism and innovation. *ayaverse.com*

House of Hype Dubai

Dubai's newest digital art hotspot, this phygital (physical + digital) park opened in February 2025. Also created by Hyperspace, it boasts more than 100 immersive experiences centered around fashion, games, music, NFTs, and more. If you've ever wanted to enter a playful, trendy Metaverse in real life, this is it. There's also one in Saudi's capital, Riyadh. *houseofhype.com*

IMAGES: JORM SANGSORN/ADOBE STOCK; SUPPLIED; INSTAGRAM; WEBSITE

FRAME THE STORY



A new world upon the sea

Meet Ulyssia – a first-of-its-kind 320m residential yacht comprising 133 residences and 22 guest suites, complemented by five-star amenities. Described as the world's most exclusive residential yacht community, the elegant interiors are supported by cutting-edge technology and top-notch service. The vision of Swiss billionaire Frank Binder, it was designed by naval architect Espen Øino's eponymous custom yacht studio, constructed by German shipbuilding company Meyer Werft, with a founding team that previously managed and operated The World. Residents will journey in absolute comfort and safety to every corner of the world, including some of the most remote locations on Earth, complete with an on-board school, restaurants, and more. Construction begins in 2025, with delivery expected in 2029.

IMAGE: ULYSSIA

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